

*God of Spirit, we give thanks that when you sent your Advocate, the apostles were empowered to speak about your deeds of power in all languages, for every people.
Give us boldness to share the Spirit's power with our neighbors. Amen.*

May 20, 2018 – Acts 2:1-8

“It’s Time for another Rummage Sale”

For one and one-half decades this church saw fit to have a rummage sale, not once, but twice each year. And if you know anything at all about me, you know that I hate rummage sales, but with good reason. Even though rummage sales allow a person to clean house every once in a while, the actual event is nothing but clutter and chaos. This church’s semi-annual sales were hard work for the volunteers whose lot it was to haul out six months’ worth of junk which had gradually accumulated in one of the church’s designated storage rooms. It was a headache for the one whose job it was to price these treasures. And it was grief for those who were forced to decide what to do with all the unsold items. I’ve learned that rummage sales are nothing but a breeding ground for grumbling and sniping between volunteers about who isn’t working hard enough, or who priced items too low or too high, or whose donations are fit only for the trash dumpster... I hate rummage sales!

And so as much as I may wish to deny it, this morning’s text is an account of what was probably the first spiritual rummage sale of Christianity. It seems that the Holy Spirit decided it was time to clean house.

Religion was no longer what it was meant to be. It no longer served to connect humankind with God, nor did it provide connection between a person and their neighbor. On the contrary, religion had evolved to a point that it provided the justification for not only ignoring the needs of one’s neighbors, but also demonizing those folks.

So on this particular Jewish festival which took place fifty days after Passover, when people from miles around had gathered together in one place, the Holy Spirit used the most unlikely of rummage sale volunteers to shake up religion and turn it on its head. She saw fit to use a bunch of Galileans for her purpose.

And although that doesn’t sound so outrageous to you and me, it was to most first-century Jews. Verse 7 says, “Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’” The crowds have just heard the deafening roar of a rushing wind and they have seen flames of fire hovering over the heads of people in the room, but what strikes them as amazing is that these folks were Galileans!

You see, residents of Galilee were distinct from other Jews in several ways. According to New Testament scholar, R.T. France, Galileans in Jerusalem were somewhat of an oddity and were considered to be almost as much of a foreigner as a Texan might be in New York City.

Racially, Galilee was more mixed than more conservative Jewish territories. Geographically, it was separated from Judea by the non-Jewish territory of Samaria. Culturally, Galileans were despised by other Jews because of their lack of sophistication. Religiously, they were considered to be lax in their observance of proper ritual. And linguistically, Galileans spoke with an accent that caused them to be the butt of Judean humor. (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/7-differences-between-galilee-and-judea-in-the-time-of-jesus/>)

And so when we hear the crowds puzzling over the fact that these were Galileans who were apparently speaking in different languages, we have a better understanding of their bewilderment.

But what’s even more significant than these strange manifestations of the Holy Spirit or the background of the disciples was the message they were proclaiming. You see, at long last they seemed to get it. They had spent the previous three years assuming the message of Jesus was about the restoration of Israel as a world power. But at some point within the last fifty days, they came to understand his message to be one that proclaimed God’s love for everyone, no exceptions.

Peter announced to the crowds that the time had arrived which the prophet Joel had spoken of centuries earlier, when both sons and daughters would prophecy, when both the young and the old would see visions and dream dreams, when both slaves and free and both men and women would proclaim God's Word. In other words, God's gifts would be poured out upon all people regardless of gender, age, or social status. And Peter's message of inclusion went on to say that everyone who calls on God will experience salvation. Everyone.

And thus we have an account of the first Great Rummage Sale, the first biblical recording of the Holy Spirit cleaning house and tossing out the old assumptions to make room for the new. But as everyone knows, clutter always seems to accumulate no matter how hard you guard against it. Which necessitates yet another rummage sale. And Bible scholar Phyllis Tickle points out that there seems to have been a great spiritual upheaval every 500 years or so, in which the Holy Spirit decided what to dispose of and what to keep, making room for new ideas about how God moves and works in the world.

About five hundred years after the birth of Christianity the Great Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire took place. Communication and trade systems collapsed. Education ceased. Math, science, and medicine failed. And the West slid into the Dark Ages. But monastic Christianity emerged, and in so doing, was successful in preserving the Christian faith.

About 500 years later, there occurred in the year 1054 what is known as the Great Schism. The Western world spent a contentious and bloody century and a half getting ready for the division of East from West. When it finally occurred, Catholicism would emerge to become the Roman Catholic Church, splitting from what is now known as the Eastern Orthodox Church

And most recently, 500 years ago, another upheaval known as the Great Reformation occurred, coinciding with political changes in the way government business was handled, as well as the invention of the printing press. And out of the Great Reformation, there emerged the Protestant Church which split from the Roman Catholic Church, and has given way to the many, many denominations of Christianity that now exist. (<http://www.phyllistickle.com/wp-content/uploads/Emergence-Chrisitanity.pdf>)

And now, here we sit at the dawn of a new millennium, approximately 500 years since the most recent house-cleaning of the Holy Spirit. Once again, religion seems to be deteriorating, having lost its appeal for many folks, as evidenced by the continuing overall decline in church attendance. People face off against each other over race, gender, economics, social status, politics, geography, and sexual orientation. We have lost the ability to love our neighbor as ourselves.

It's time for another Great Rummage Sale. And the Holy Spirit has invited you and me and MCC churches to assist in her semi-millennial house cleaning. And the message is the same as it has been throughout the ages: God's love and grace embrace everyone.

MCC's role is to proclaim a message that affirms the human body, one that affirms human sexuality as a gift from God, and one that affirms LGBT people as part of the diversity of God's creation. Ours is a message that some people may be hearing for the first time in their lives – one that proclaims that they are God's miracle, not God's mistake; that God loves us because of who we are, not in spite of who we are. It's a new message to some, and yet it's the same message that has emerged with each Great Rummage sale.

Like all rummage sales, this one abounds with bickering over who's wrong and who's right, what needs to be kept and what notions no longer work for us. I don't like rummage sales because they are always so chaotic. But they are necessary. And it's time for another one. Some of us believe it's past time.

May we open ourselves to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives. May we take on the difficult, sometimes messy work of volunteering at her Rummage Sale. And may we take our cue from Peter in boldly reclaiming the timeless message of God's immeasurable love and grace for everyone, no exceptions. Amen.