

The Verse you Never Noticed

Hespeler 5 June, 2022 © Scott McAndless – Pentecost, Communion

[Genesis 11:1-9](#), Psalm 104:24-34, 35b, [Acts 2:1-21](#), John 14:8-27

I want you to do something for me. I want you, for the next couple of minutes, not to look at the reading that we had from the Book of Acts a few minutes ago. Do not look at it on your bulletin or in your Bible. I mean, we only just heard it read and I'm sure that many of you also read along, so it should be fresh in your minds anyways. But I'm also aware that, now that I've told you that you can't do something, you also probably feel this irresistible temptation to do it anyways. That is human. But resist that temptation.

I don't want you to look because I want to share with you an experience that I had a couple of weeks ago. I was attending the Festival of Homiletics – a gathering that allows church leaders to hear some of the best and most creative preachers in this hemisphere as they preach and talk about preaching. It was a great experience. And I was listening to a conversation between two preachers.

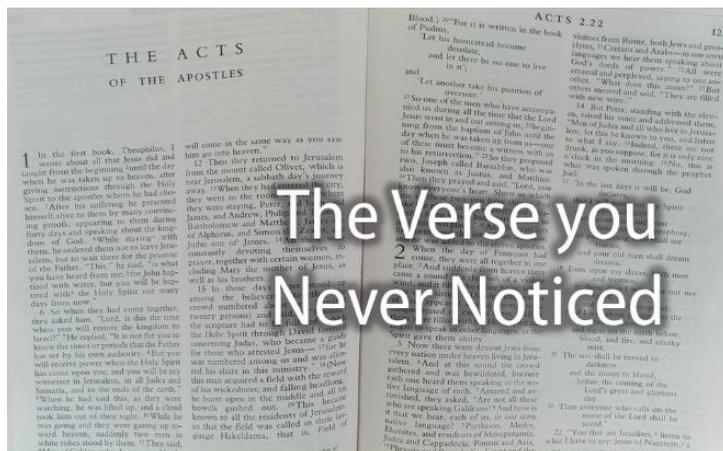
One of them was Nadia Bolz-Weber, a rather amazing Lutheran preacher, and she was talking about how we can sometimes skip over verses. And she pulled out, for example, the passage we read this morning – the passage that is traditionally read every year in churches on this day, the Day of Pentecost.

A Throwaway Verse

And she was remarking that she had been reading and preaching on this passage for years and had found it to be very powerful. But if you had asked her, over those many years, if there was one verse that she could have dropped, that was completely incidental and you didn't need to bother thinking about, it would have to be the first verse of the chapter.

That verse didn't matter one bit and it wouldn't matter if it wasn't there in the Bible. But then, last year, she took out this chapter and she just couldn't get past the first verse. All of a sudden that one verse that she would have been ready to just throw right out of the Bible for years meant the world to her.

Now, at this point, I was feeling pretty much like I'm sure you're feeling right now. Because I didn't have a Bible with me. I didn't have a bulletin with the text in front of me. I was asking myself what on earth the first verse of the chapter said. I'm pretty sure every preacher listening was wondering. Certainly, the other preacher up on the stage was wondering because she asked. Then Nadia Bolz-Weber read us the verse.



Chapter two of the Book of Acts starts like this: **“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”**

Caught Off Guard

And as I heard those words, I felt the tears come to my eyes. I knew exactly what she meant. Whoa, talk about a powerful book, eh? Talk about a tricky book! I mean, it is almost as if God, through some process of inspiration, planted that verse right there so many centuries ago. And it just sat there, unassuming, a completely benign verse that everybody just read over and forgot and then, all of a sudden, in 2022, boom! It hits us over the head. It suddenly means the world.

Because yes, we took it for granted that being able to gather together and worship and pray in one place was something that we could do at any time. Granted, we didn't always do it. There were other things that got in the way or that seemed more important at the time. I have long said that one of the marks of any Christian in our society is that they are, at the very least, aware of which church they don't go to on Sunday. But we at least knew that the possibility was there.

But then, suddenly, the possibility wasn't there. And we did find ways to meet virtually and that was good and it taught us many things. There were some definite pluses to it, as a matter of fact. But that did not change the sense of loss that we felt and still feel. And because God understands how we feel, I truly believe that God has sent us a message this morning. God wrote it for us more than 1900 years ago. It has been delivered to us this morning. And that message is, **“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”**

What its Telling us

So, let us think today about what that verse means in the story of Pentecost. Pentecost is, in the minds of many Christians, the birthday of the Christian church. Yes, the story of salvation centres around Easter Sunday. The resurrection of Jesus brings us the hope of life beyond death and of victory beyond the defeats of this world. But the creation of the church would have to wait fifty days until, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ would bring it into being.

But this verse is a reminder that, before the rushing of the wind and before the descending flames of fire, there was something else that made Pentecost possible – the simple fact that they were all together in one place. And we believe that it was God who made the wind rush. And it was God who made the flames come down. These things were signs of the presence of God's Holy Spirit, a gift that made the church a possibility. But could God have given that gift if the people of the church had not gathered together in one place?

Gathering in Person Matters

On one hand, the answer to that question is yes, of course. God can do whatever God wants. But, on the other hand, there seems to be no question that there was something essential about the church gathering on that day. There is something about feeling the warmth of other human bodies around you. There is something about hearing and feeling one another's breaths and being able to greet one another with the clasp of a hand or what the early church called a holy kiss. And when we do things together in one another's presence, when we pray or when we sing, there is always, always a sense that when you put us all together the whole is inexplicably greater than just

the sum of the parts. Pentecost can't just be about the Spirit. It also has to be about these bodies gathered together.

Back to Babel

And yet, at the same time, the gathering alone is not enough. People have long noticed that there is a connection between the story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts and the story of the tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis. The author of the Book of Acts clearly chose to write his story as a kind of parallel to the story in Genesis. The languages get confused in Genesis and then they get unconfused in Acts. And it is important to note that the story in Genesis also begins with people coming together. **“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.”**

So there, too, we have bodies coming together in a certain place at a certain time. And as a result of that gathering, they too feel the impulse and the ability to reach for something that is greater than just the sum of the parts. They even see in their uniting a possibility to reach a higher spiritual plane, which is represented by this idea of building a tower to heaven.

But, of course, in Genesis that impulse is a negative thing. The story illustrates that the simple fact of us coming together does not always lead to positive outcomes. Sometimes we just come together because we each think that we can build our own tower, our own way to heaven. But when that is all we are doing, it is only going to break down in fighting with each other and starting to speak our own languages because we're only focused on our own needs. That just ends in division, just like happened on that plain in Shinar.

Pentecost Repairs Babel

But when we pair that coming together in body with an openness to the power of God's Spirit, we are able to open ourselves to embrace something bigger than just our own ambition. We can learn to put aside our own agendas so that we can embrace the possibility of what God would like to do among us and through us.

I realize that the world has changed in some very important ways over the past two and a half years. I understand that we have learned new ways of interacting with one another without necessarily being together in the same space. Some of those lessons have been very good. I understand that the world is not going to just go back to the way it was, nor do I think that it ought to. But let us not be afraid to take some time to grieve what we have lost. And let us make the effort, starting today, to retake what we can.

Every one of us needs to judge for ourselves. Only you know all of the various issues of safety and protection of others that is necessary in your case. Only you can decide what will maintain the proper balance in your life, but I would challenge you to find some places in your life where you embrace the power that is present in that simple act of being together in one place. I would encourage you to make it a priority to gather with believers in one place, ideally in this place. I would encourage you to find ways to pray in the presence of others and to enter into some experience of worship. There is power in being able to do that.

Open to the Spirit

Yet, at the same time, since it is Pentecost and we are celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, a gift that brought the church into being, let me also encourage us all to do this with an openness to the presence of God's Holy Spirit. Let us not make the mistake that was made on the plain of Shinar and become so obsessed with our own agendas and accomplishing our self-centred goals. The true power of being able to come together comes to us when we are able to set aside all of that and to embrace the possibility that God is calling us, in unity, to create something bigger than any one of us as individuals.

But let us find ways to come together as God's people. Do it online, sure, there will be times when we get a lot of meaning out of doing that. But let us also not forsake joining together because, when we do, we have a God who can do some pretty amazing and surprising things. We have a God so amazing that God hid a message for us today in a text written centuries upon centuries ago.