

The message given by Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Zoelzer on Pentecost, May 23, 2010 based on Acts 2:1-21.

### “The Sound of Two Hands Clapping”

Jimmy Durante was one of the great entertainers of the twentieth century. Jimmy Durante poked fun of himself by calling himself “the great snozzola” because he had a very prominent nose on his face, and he spoke in a very gravelly voice that highlighted his nose. His famous tagline was, “Good night Mrs. Calabash wherever you are?” He was known for his vaudeville comedy routines, his movies, his radio shows and finally his television appearances. He was one of the most loveable entertainers of his time.

Once, he was asked to be part of a show for World War II veterans. He told the inviters his schedule was very busy and he could afford only a few minutes, but if they wouldn’t mind his doing one short monologue and immediately leaving for his next appointment, he would come. Of course the show’s director agreed happily.

But when Jimmy got on stage, something interesting happened. He went through the short monologue and then stayed. The applause grew louder and louder, and he kept staying. Pretty soon, he had been on fifteen, twenty, then thirty minutes. Finally, he took a last bow and left the stage. Backstage someone stopped him and said, “I thought you had to go after a few minutes? What happened?”

Jimmy answered, “I did have to go, but I can show you the reason I stayed. You can see for yourself if you will look at the front row.”

In the front row were two men, each of whom had lost an arm in the war. One had lost his right arm and the other had lost his left. Together,

they were able to clap, and that's exactly what they were doing, loudly and cheerfully – two hands clapping.

The first Pentecost was like two hands clapping. The followers of Jesus were in an upper room in Jerusalem. It was now fifty days since Jesus rose from the dead and ten days since he ascended into heaven. It was also a time that Jerusalem was filled with worshippers and foreign travelers who had come to celebrate the Jewish Pentecost festival.

Suddenly, there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house. Then tongues as a fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of those present. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in a way that everyone understood no matter what their languages. The disciples went out into the street, and all were amazed because they could hear them speaking in their own language about what God was doing through Jesus – the Tower of Babel story in reverse.

Some thought that those speaking had been drinking. Others were amazed and perplexed. Peter stood up among the crowd and gave an emotional speech which you heard part of about how God was still speaking and doing something new through the life of Jesus of Nazareth. So many people were moved by his words that 3,000 people were baptized that day - the birthday of the Christian Church! Now multiple hands were clapping because of the power of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is the acclamation that Christianity is two hands clapping – one hand based on spirit and the other hand based on community. Pentecost is the understanding that to believe in God is not only to have intellectual thought that there is a God and the desire to want to believe in

God. Christianity is also about a sense of presence in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is another way to describe God that makes God real and personal. The Holy Spirit is that bursting of the presence of God into our lives and into the world.

The followers of Jesus experienced that bursting forth of the Spirit on the first Pentecost, and it changed their life forever. Before Pentecost, they were lost. Jesus had been killed, then raised, then ascended, but they were not sure what they were to do. The Holy Spirit first gave them spirit and then gave them focus. The focus became bringing the ways of God through Jesus into the world to build faith, grace, service, and inclusion. Because they experienced God in a new way, they suddenly had a sense of confidence and focus about who God is and what God was doing through them.

They then boldly moved out into the world to share the experience of God through Jesus Christ and the presence of the Spirit and invite others into community and presence. It became the sound of multiple hands clapping for joy as they went out and shared the news of what God was doing through them!

I am in the process of reading a new book by my Old Testament professor, Dr. Walter Brueggemann. Dr. Brueggemann is 77 now but still writes books, lectures and preaches. He has written 58 books. His latest book is entitled *Journey to the Common Good* and is a book about neighborliness based on the teachings of Genesis, Exodus, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Jesus.

Dr. Brueggemann argues that as a nation we have lost our sense of the common good because we have adopted the system of the Pharaohs of

ancient Egypt of scarcity that leads to the conditions of anxiety and continual production that discourages much interest in the common good. He argues we have become a collection of anxious individuals fighting and clawing each other for more.

Over against this reality, Dr. Brueggemann lifts up the biblical stories of Exodus and Wilderness. Exodus is about bringing the people of Israel out of Pharaoh's system of scarcity, anxiety, and perpetual work into the wilderness where they were given abundance in manna – bread from heaven – and they became a community that worked together to gather it and use it. If you recall, every morning, manna was like the dew on the ground that they went out to gather except on the Sabbath. They could gather as much as they wanted, but it always measured what they needed and if they tried to keep it for the next day, it would spoil except what they gathered the day before the Sabbath. Manna taught them to appreciate the abundance of God's creation and work together to share and care for what they had in community. Much of the writings of Jeremiah and Isaiah are about how people have lost that sense of community.

I would say that in the last 30 years we have promoted the individual so much over the common good that we have tipped the balance toward individualism that we have lost a sense of the common good so that it is getting harder and harder to collectively get anything done. Our roads are falling apart, our willingness to fund public education for the next generation is waning, we have just had a big fight about the importance and need for health care for all, and we are afraid of strangers that look or act differently from us. We have lost our sense of who is our neighbor and about how to practice neighborliness.

Dr. Brueggemann would say that our system breeds anxiety and distrust so much that we can't speak honestly to each other and listen to each other let alone help each other or trust each other. We are moving away from community and the common good.

Felix Mendelssohn was a famous German composer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote beautiful music. He was born the same year Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809. It is claimed that Mendelssohn once visited a cathedral in Europe that contained a priceless organ. The cathedral organist was playing a great hymn of the church at the time. Mendelssohn listened for a while, and then approached the organist to request permission to play the great instrument himself.

"I don't know you," came the blunt reply, "and we do not allow just any chance stranger access to the organ." Mendelssohn was not easily discouraged – understanding perfectly the musician's high regard for the instrument – and finally succeeded in achieving his objective.

As Mendelssohn played, the cathedral was filled with indescribably beautiful music. When he had finished playing, the organist who stood close by was in tears. "Who are you?" he asked. The great musician made himself known. "And to think," The organist replied, "an old fool like me almost denied the master the opportunity to fill this instrument with his spirit."

Do you know what stands in opposition to all of this anxiety and lack of trust? – the church. The church is one place where grace is given freely and abundance, inclusion, and neighborliness is emphasized.

The church believe in all that stuff about welcoming the stranger and living in community and in sharing and caring because that's the reality God

put before us from the Garden of Eden and through the feeding of the 5000 for Jesus. When Jesus fed the 5000, he took, blessed, broke, and gave the 5 loaves and 2 fish, all had plenty, and there were 12 baskets left over.

The church in the name of Jesus Christ teaches another way – the way of inclusion and neighborliness in Jesus’ name. Last Sunday a woman of our congregation who has been a member here for almost 30 years told Pastor Kim and I that last Sunday was going to be her last Sunday because she and her husband were moving to Texas. She was excited about the new phase in her life but rather sad about leaving FCC. She said that for her and her husband this place had become her extended family and she was grateful for all the spiritual and community opportunities this place had provided for her and her husband and now grown children.

When I think of church, where else can people be accepted for who they are, be spiritual fed, be invited to grow as a person and as a person of faith, given opportunities to serve others, and do it with people they are not related to or not have much else in common except for a love of God and an appreciation of neighbor that Jesus taught?

Here we learn to speak the truth in love, rally around some core values, work together to bring the ways of God into our world and into our lives and along the way make friends with people of all ages. Do we get hurt sometimes? Of course. Are we always learning how to speak, act, and care as a follower of Jesus? Of Course. Are we people who are always in need of healing and understanding. Of course.

Church is a community of people trying to live the ways of God and practice abundance, grace, hope, love, caring, sharing, neighborliness, and community because it feeds us and makes us better people. When we

learn to do it here, we can do it out in the world as well. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we practice presence and community - two hands clapping.

Have you ever tried to clap hands with another person? It takes a little concentration and some eye-hand coordination so that together in harmony you can bring the hands together and you can clap. Two hands clapping in a church means people working together to build up the body of Christ and to be filled with the Spirit that burst forth with spirit and joy. That means we need to listen to each other, respect each other, challenge each other, and encourage each other as we work to live and share the good news and invite others to be part of hand clapping.

Let's try it – clap with the person next to you. It takes some effort doesn't it, but because of the effort, we are now in community with the person next to us – two hands clapping

Our pledge cards represent hands clapping in ways that says – we are not slaves of production and anxiety. We are not just about consuming and personal gratification. We are more than individuals. We are children of God who are brothers and sisters in Christ making noise like the wind on the first Pentecost inviting people to find hope and togetherness in a community that cares about you. Let's start clapping and let the spirit and community move us! Amen.