

"Dead Men Talking"

Titus 3:3-7; Act 2:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 24, 2015 – Pentecost Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

After the crucifixion of Jesus his close followers suffered doubly from their loss. First, they felt the personal pain of missing one who was both friend and teacher. We know what is it to lose someone special to us. It's a hollow feeling that pulls on the gut. No matter how busy we stay, the immediacy of separation is slow to go away. Those who followed Jesus missed him like a member of their own family.

Yet, there was also another loss of a deeper and more profound kind. This was the loss of one who was a gift of God. Here was one they understood to be the Messiah, the promised one. He was not only rejected, but put to death.

Could there be anything more unbelievable? How could a person who was all good be accused of being all bad? The very actions of those responsible was blasphemy. Yet, it was all too true. Yes, their Savior had now been raised up to be with God, but they were left feeling directionless and without power. They were lost without him.

As they approached the Jewish festival of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, the close followers of Jesus were like dead men and dead women. They had no strength; it had all been drained out of them. They turned to God and they turned to each other, but it still didn't give them what they sought. Dead men walking-- that's what they were, and they didn't know what to do.

The Book of Acts records that on the day of Pentecost Jesus' closest followers were gathered in one place. And while they were there they heard a noise that came from the sky, a noise like the strong winds of a storm, but when they looked out it was a fair day. This noise filled the whole house where they were sitting. And what they saw looked like streaks of fire coming in all directions and touching each person there. No one knew what to make of it.

As a tongue of fire came first on one and then on another, each began to speak simultaneously. They spoke non-stop about the great things God had done but, incredibly, people were talking in different languages. They were so filled up with this experience that some who came by concluded they were all drunk with new wine. If they were intoxicated, though, it was not by fermented spirits but by the power of the Holy Spirit. These dead men were now talking and in many languages. They didn't understand what was happening, but they knew that it was coming from God.

Whatever else Pentecost was, it became the turning point of a leaderless people and began the birth of the Church. From then on everything was different for them as they regularly called upon the name of Jesus and strived to follow in his way.

It was Peter on that Pentecost Day who gave interpretation to their experience. "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, what you witness is what the prophet Joel spoke

about. His message from God was, 'In the last days I will pour out my Spirit. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. In those days I will give my Spirit to those who serve me, both men and women, and they will proclaim my message.' You see, "Peter said, "that is what is happening now and whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved."

Dead men talking. Life restored. Power received in fullness. Faith experienced for all its richness. Service offered with willingness and joy. Lives changed. When the Spirit of God is a fire inside persons they are never the same again. They may look the same outwardly, but inside they have gone from the doldrums to individuals alive with conviction.

Recently a very special group of people were honored with the Columbus Living Faith Awards. Ten persons are lifted up each year as examples of faith in action. And every year they prove to be an inspiration to all of us.

The Living Faith Awards are given to recognize people of exemplary faith whose lives have made a positive impact upon our community. The persons honored have not sought recognition; rather, the awards have sought them.

Of one recipient it was said, "He loves people of all ages, conditions, and colors. He does not expect or want any recognition for his good deeds. No job is too tedious for him."

Of another: "She is a tireless advocate for the health, safety, and security of children. She is a committed public servant who spends countless hours giving to her community."

Here's what was said about other awardees:

... He is a loving, caring, and sensitive individual who is supportive of his staff and the communities which he serves. He instills in everyone that people are to be treated with dignity no matter what the circumstances.

.... She has accepted challenges and made significant contributions in the workplace, in the community, and in her personal life that were made possible through her faith in God. This has been evident in her teaching, administering, and counseling in the profession of education and in her work in the church community. She believes in the power and grace of God.

... He acts upon and lives out his faith every day. He is a model of Christian vocation and lives and breathes the Gospel in action .

.... He daily goes about the work of the Lord through his profession and through the dedication to his church. He is a very humble servant and never seeks notoriety for his good works. As a school principal he seems to have the capacity to make room for another child in his heart every moment of the day. His gentleness calms the angriest one. His love touches the most neglected one. And his joy brightens the most sorrowful child's day .

. . . Her dependence upon her faith for strength has been an inspiration. It is evident that other staff and volunteers recognize that here is a person who gives action and not just lip

service to loving her neighbor as herself. Every time she has been singled out for attention, her reaction has been that there are others more deserving .

.... He is grounded in the Christian faith and his close, passionate relationship with God is what sustains him in his ministry to the HIV/AIDS community. He is committed to giving voice to the voiceless and to standing with those who have no one. His whole life is lived with the constant focus of what God wants of him.

So here were ten people who were making a difference in life because God was making a difference in their lives. These may have been strong people in their own right, but they were further empowered through the active presence of the Holy Spirit. They sensed God at work in them and acknowledge it freely. Whatever good they do is not really about them. It's about a greater power that works through them.

These Living Faith recipients serve as an inspiration to the community throughout the entire year and today, on Pentecost, they especially stand as examples for us. These individuals are people set on fire to do Christ's work and bring his message to a waiting world. They talk the talk and walk the walk of faith. They make a visible difference in their corners of the world.

While not without human flaws, these awardees show how they are empowered to transform people and situations in keeping with God's intention. Now the good news for us this morning is that just as they are able to make a significant difference in surrounding life, so are we capable of making a difference. The power of the Holy Spirit is already there within us and, when we are ready to use our gift, we can make God's love come alive.