

June 5, 2022 The Day of Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Acts 2:1-21

"Witnessing Transcendence"

Douglas T. King

What does transcendence sound like? Writer and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner wrote the following words at home on a hot, hazy summer day.

"On the wall behind me, an old banjo clock was tick-tocking the time away. Outside I could hear the twitter of swallows as they swooped in and out of the eaves of the barn. Every once in a while, in the distance, a rooster crowed, though it was well past sunup. Several rooms away, in another part of the house, two men were doing some carpentry. I could not make out what they were saying, but I was aware of the low rumble of their voices, the muffled sounds of their hammers, and the uneven lengths of silence in between. It was getting on toward noon, and from time to time my stomach growled as it went about its own obscure business which I neither understand nor want to.

"They were all of them random sounds without any apparent purpose or meaning, and yet as I paused to listen to them, I found myself hearing them with something more than just my ears to the point where they became in some way enormously meaningful. The swallows, the rooster, the workmen, my stomach, all with their elusive rhythms, their harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoint, became, as I listened, the sound of my own life speaking to me. Never had I heard just such a coming together of sounds before, and it is unlikely that I will ever

hear them in just the same combination again. Their music was unique and unrepeatable and beyond describing in its freshness.

"I have no clear idea what the sounds meant or what my life was telling me. What does the song of a swallow mean? What is the muffled sound of a hammer trying to tell? And yet as I listened to those sounds, and listened with something more than just my hearing, I was moved by their inexpressible eloquence and suggestiveness, by the sense I had that they were a music rising up out of the mystery of not just my life, but of life itself. In much the same way, that is what I mean by saying that God speaks into or out of the thick of our days." (Buechner, pp. 1-2)

Buechner hears transcendence in the ticking of clocks and the twitter of swallows. What does transcendence sound like? That Pentecost day all those years ago, the disciples were overcome by the Holy Spirit and they burst forth in languages from every land; A cacophony of many voices calling out with loud exclamations. We are told they spoke about God's deeds of power, which is another way to say transcendence.

From Peter's defense it sounds like a lot of people in the crowd just assumed it was all drunken rambling. And this makes complete sense. God's transcendence is beyond our full comprehension. The community of believers is going through this extraordinarily difficult transition. Those first disciples had Jesus' immanent bodily presence among them during his life and his appearances after the resurrection. The transcendence of the divine shown through him. Now they must rely upon the perceptually elusive Holy Spirit to point them to the presence and power of the divine. Transcendence by its very nature is

beyond our mortal ability to fully grasp. No wonder it sounded like the words of those who might be cocktail-impaired.

Peter goes on to paint a vivid portrait of both the sights and sounds of transcendence. We are told of prophesying sons and daughters, of visions and dreams; of blood and fire, and smoky mist; of a darkened sun and a moon the color of blood. It is all so dramatic and larger than life.

I cannot speak for you, but I do not have many moments in my life that mirror Peter's description of God's transcendence. My opportunities to experience God's transcendence are more likely to come in the fashion that Fred Buechner describes. They come peeking through our immanent reality. Even in those rare moments when I have experienced what I would call a mystical connection to the divine it has never come in blaring stereo and flashing technicolor but rather in the subtle murmurs and hues that can only be recognized by introspective quiet.

Most of us need to listen and watch diligently while sifting through what we are experiencing to recognize how God's transcendence may be found in the midst of our daily lives. This is why that first Pentecost, all those years ago is so very important to us. It is so very easy to lose sight of God's transcendence. After all, by its very nature, the boundlessness of the divine brought into the midst of our every limitation, cannot be owned or classified in any adequate manner.

If we could do so, we would not need each other, we would not need the church. We would all be plugged into God's presence like some feed off of Twitter or Instagram. But that is not how it works.

Those poor disciples had some challenge before them. Jesus had ascended to heaven and now it was their job to spread the

gospel and the resurrection with no visible sign in sight. This Pentecost explosion of the Holy Spirit was the kick-starter for them. This is the birth of the church. As the text in Acts continues, so does Peter's sermon. He preaches of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and Jesus' ascension to sit at God's right hand. We are told that awe came upon everyone and many signs and wonders were performed. Three thousand were baptized that day.

Well the service is not over yet today but I am not sensing we are going to see a host of signs and wonders performed and the likelihood we will all be filled with awe en masse seems remote. This is why we need the church so much. We need each other to keep recognizing and sharing the subtle and fleeting glimpses of the transcendent.

What does transcendence sound and look like?

Eugene Peterson writes this,

"Transcendence cannot be forced upon us. It doesn't yell, doesn't announce its presence with a bullhorn, doesn't advertise itself on roadside billboards. There is nothing bullying about transcendence.

"What it requires is noticing...(God's) transcendence is already here...But in our hurry to get someplace else, we miss it. There is always more here than meets the eye. We miss a lot. We need friends who will grab our shirttails, turn us around, and show us what we just now missed in our hurry to get across the street on the way to the bank. We need friends who will tap us on the shoulder, interrupting our non-stop commentary on the talk of the town so that we can hear the truth. We need witnesses to transcendence."

You need to be a witness to transcendence for me and I need to do the same for you. On this day when we celebrate the birth of the church it is a reminder that each of us may journey with God but we need each other to journey well. You will spot moments of transcendence I would never notice and I will see transcendence in ways you might not begin to consider. On that first Pentecost each heard in their own language. We then need to share with one another what we have heard and seen.

One of the remarkable gifts of our Presbyterian theological tradition is that we believe the Spirit is most clearly heard when we gather together and listen to each other. We have always believed the best way to discern God's Spirit is by discerning together. Each time we gather as the church we are given another opportunity to share how we have experienced the divine' transcendence revealing itself among us.

Sometimes I fear we have too many conversations about the mechanics of being the church; organizing the logistics of the next event. And not enough time being witnesses to each other about how we have experienced God's transcendence in our lives.

What does transcendence sound and look like? It sounds and looks like important conversations about scripture in Discipleship classes; the screeching and laughter of children running around the building during Monday, Music, and More; people jumping into cars to scatter across the area to serve others on the Day of Service; the moments when glorious music fills the sanctuary; a visit of a Stephen Minister, bringing words of comfort; a meal of fried chicken and strawberries as food and stories and laughter are shared.

There are so many moments when God's transcendence comes peeking through in this place and in our lives. As we celebrate

the birth of the church, let us remind ourselves that sharing what we witness of transcendence with each other is exactly why the church was born in the first place.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Buechner, Frederick, *The Sacred Journey*, HarperSanFrancisco,
San Francisco, 1982.