

Who Are You Not To Be?

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Acts 2:1-21
John 14:8-27

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Pentecost

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Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

John 14:8-27

⁸Philip said to [Jesus], “Lord, show us [God], and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen [God]. How can you say, ‘Show us [God]’?” ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in [God] and [God] is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but [God] who dwells in me does [God’s] works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in [God] and [God] is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

¹²*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to [God].* ¹³*I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that [God] may be glorified in the Son.* ¹⁴*If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask [God], and [God] will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees [God] nor knows [God]. You know [God], because [God] abides with you, *and [God] will be in you.* ¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in [God], and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by [God], and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” ²²Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” ²³Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and [God] will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from [God] who sent me.

²⁵“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom [God] will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give

to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.



“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

It's from A Return To Love by Marianne Williamson, sometimes incorrectly attributed to Nelson Mandela since he quoted it in his 1994 inauguration speech as he became President of South Africa.

It's a powerful commentary on our lives. And I can't believe that I'm quoting Marianne Williamson's pop theology. But it ring true. Hear it again – hear it carefully:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. **We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be?** You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as

children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Could that be possible? Could it? We are not afraid of being inadequate – we are afraid of being too adequate. And because of that we ask ourselves the wrong question. We ask ourselves “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” And that fear has risen to a point within us that we're afraid that it is blasphemous to own that possibility about ourselves. “Well, isn't 'pride' a sin? To be faithful aren't we supposed to be humble, supposed to fade into the background, don't pretend that we are God?”

“Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Who am I indeed? Who are you? Well, I am, you are, a child of God. That's who you are. Who are you not to be ... whatever? Who are you to pretend to not be brilliant or gorgeous or talented or fabulous? Or to be whatever adjective God has chosen to attach to you by virtue of your gifts?

“You know [God], because [God] abides with you, and [God] will be in you.” That's not Nelson Mandela. That's not Marianne Williamson. That's not pop theology. That's Jesus. *God* is in you. God *is* in you. God is *in* you. God is in *you*. Say it however you want but anyway it's said it conveys a startling reminder. It's what Jesus says. So why don't we believe it? Why are we afraid if that possibility?

It gets a little scarier, even. “[T]he one who believes in me,” says Jesus, “will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to [God]. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that [God] may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

You ... will do greater works than Jesus. You will do greater works than Jesus. I ... will do greater works than Jesus. I can't accept that about myself.

I am not afraid of being inadequate – I am afraid of being too adequate. If I have God in me, then most certainly I can be adequate almost beyond the imaginable. And do you know what? I believe Jesus – I believe what he says – I believe that just as he is in God and God is in him so also is God in me. Do you believe it? Yes, you do, if you believe what Jesus says.

“On that day,” says Jesus – “that day” meaning the day that the Spirit comes upon the followers – and Pentecost is that day that we celebrate that great coming of God's Spirit upon the church – so that day has been upon us for many, many years now – “On that day you will know that I am in [God], and you in me, and I in you.”

You gotta believe it if you are truly a follower. God is in you.

I did a quick Google search for the phrase “where was God?” I got references to the 9/11 tragedy, to the Katrina disaster, the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Haiti earthquake, in the Nashville flood, etc, etc, etc. Where was God? Where was God in any instance of human suffering or tragedy?

God is in you, says Jesus. God is in each of us. So in that case, God was there on 9/11, there in the Haiti earthquake, there in the Katrina hurricane. God was there if any believer was there. God was there. So we must be God in whatever we do – and own the fact that God is in us – and not let that fact intimidate us into fear.

We can ignore God's presence within us if we choose. But God's presence is still there. Sometimes God's presence can seem very close and other times we may feel as if God is no longer in there for us. But remember, it's not our *feelings* that determine the reality of that Presence in our lives, but our feelings do affect our perception of reality.

I posted on my Facebook page a week or so ago a new profile photo, that photo of me and a bunch of little children in Soweto, a community near Johannesburg in South Africa – a community which was a designated place for Blacks to live during the evil days of apartheid when white people wanted black people to work for them but not live with them. I was in Soweto in April of this year at the invitation of Bishop Paul Verry, pastor of Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg, to join him at a meeting of Zimbabwean refugees living there. I was not there to do the works of Jesus, was I?

These children were gathered in the parking lot of the Methodist Community Center. They were rolling old tires and chasing them as they tottered off-balance. They were noisy and energetic as any kids might be. They were making up games and giggling with each other. Some had runny noses. Some had dirty faces. Some had old clothes. One had a bandaged head from some pretty severe burns. I was hanging out with them waiting for the “important meeting” to start. But I wasn't there to do the works of Jesus, was I? They weren't expecting God to be in me, were they?

Well, I saw God in them. Runny noses, dirty faces, loud giggling, toothless grins. God was in them. They could – according to Jesus – do greater works than he. And so can I. And so can you.

They asked that when we returned later that day, could we bring bags of chips. Is that what Jesus would do? You better believe it is!

Chips. I'm pretty sure that's like bread and fish stretched to feed 5,000. I'm pretty sure that's like wine and bread shared with friends. I'm pretty sure chips are just like water turned into wine, like plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (This was Sunday, after all.), like manna from heaven, like the bread of life. Chips for the kids. I can do the works of Jesus.

We brought back chips. And they devoured them. Shared them. Giggled through them. Wiped greasy hands on their pants. And their eyes lit in the dark of the night that slipped in at the end of my day there.

God is in me and I am in you, says Jesus. God is in you. You can do works greater than me.

“But Jesus, I’m afraid. I don’t want too *much* God in me.” I can just hear the internal argument we have about this being God stuff, this doing Jesus works stuff, “Cause if I begin to acknowledge that God is in me and if I begin to accept what Jesus has said, then God might expect more from me. And you – my friend, my neighbor, my brother or sister, my enemy, that stranger, that little kid in Soweto – you might begin to expect God’s works to come out of me. And then next time maybe you want a juice box with those chips – or a new pair of shoes— or an iPod – or, oh no, a kind word or a hug or a moment of my time or a speck of my love. And I’m not sure I want to go that far. Well, sure, I know Jesus went that far. But I don’t want to have to. But that was Jesus. I’m not Jesus.”

But you are, Jesus says. In fact, you’re even greater than me, he says.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” Do you suppose Nelson Mandela used that quote in his presidential inaugural address because of the children in Soweto? Well, that’s where he lived before he was dragged off to jail and locked away as a political threat for 27 years. So, yeah, maybe he used the quote because he knows we’re afraid of the God-power within each of us.

“We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.” Did he feel compelled to remind the world that not a single one of us has the right to reject our place as a child of God by hiding beyond some unfounded fear? I suspect he did.

And did Jesus feel compelled to try and calm the anxiety and fear in his friends who he knew would miss him, who he knew would cave in to that basic human nature – fear of the unknown? I suspect he did. And did Jesus know that we would try and pretend that we could not do greater works? And did know that we would try not to be who we are called to be? Yeah, he did.

Tony Campolo, emeritus professor of sociology at Eastern University – who you’ll hear here at Hope this afternoon – put it this way as he preached this passage once:

You see, Jesus [performed] miracles ... But there’s something even greater than miracles that God has called us to do. [God] has called us to be instruments of love to people who need to experience love. And when we do those things, these acts of love are greater than the work that [Jesus] did when he walked on water.

But there’s even a deeper meaning to that verse than that. Here it is: When Jesus was here in the flesh he was only able to look into the eyes of one person at a time; only able to express love personally to one person at a time. But he has ascended to be with [God] and has come back as a spirit, the Holy Spirit that comes into our lives and fills us and drives us to love. Now if thousands and thousands of people go out tomorrow morning and each of them performs one act of love in his name, then it can be said – you can hear Jesus uttering these words – "The work that I do you are doing and you’re doing it greater than I did it because thousands are greater than one. I could only love one person face to face at the time. But there are thousands, yea, millions of you now and each of you at any given moment can love someone intimately and powerfully in my name."

A bag of chips? No big deal. A moment of love. A work as great as that of Jesus. A thousand bags of chips and 5,000 hugs and a million moments of stooping down in a parking lot to say “I love you”, which, says Jesus, means that God loves you. That is greater than the works of Jesus.

Do not be afraid. Do not try to not be who God has created you to be. Do not reject that God is in you. And allow God’s spirit on this Pentecost Sunday blow fresh in your life and open you to be brilliant or gorgeous or talented or fabulous – or if none of that, then simply own that God is in you and that you are God’s love in this world.

Amen.