"Remember Green Stamps?"

ACTS 2:1-21 (NRSVUE) ***When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. [2]And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3]Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested*** **on each of them.** ***[4]All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. [5]Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. [6]And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. [7]Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? [8]And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? [9]Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10]Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, [11]Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." [12]All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" [13]But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." [14]But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. [15]Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. [16]No, 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.
[18]Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.
[19]And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
[20]The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
[21]Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

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For a couple of weeks I've focused on some of the distractions we face as faithful stewards of holy writ. Narratives written two millennia ago can seem strange in our context, and we can be distracted from the point.

For example, the slave girl last week had a divining spirit… She was a fortune teller who became a distracting annoyance to Paul, so he cast the spirt from her. The story is fascinating, and our attention is drawn to her, rather than to the point of the broader passage. She was the reason Paul and Silas were put in jail, where, through a miraculous chain of events, their jailer was converted. But, if we stop with the fortune-telling girl, we miss that.

Or, take today's text: ***All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to***

speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. We may immediately recall the controversy in Corinth, two decades later; the hullabaloo over speaking in tongues.

But there's a serious difference. In Corinth, the tongues were incomprehensible gibberish that, apparently, nobody could understand; so Paul told the Corinthians that speaking in tongues was useless unless someone interpreted. Even then, he said, it is the least important of the gifts. The Christians in Corinth had elevated it to the top of the pecking order.

In today's text, the disciples are not spouting indecipherable babbling, but languages, and people from virtually every known land and ethnicity understood what they were saying! *The focus is on the hearing*, not the speaking.

But we can get so caught up in the extraordinary events that are taking place, that when Peter says, ***"…this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel…"*** we may brush it off with the thought, "Oh, so Joel predicted Pentecost." That's how I've seen it… until I read it this time and decided to revisit Joel. Remembering the three most important elements in understanding Scripture: "Context, Context, and Context," I began looking more closely at Joel.

Turns out, Joel opens up a whole new angle to the event we call Pentecost.

Not a lot is known about Joel or his specific historic setting. Usually he's placed somewhere in the early years after the split between the northern tribes and Judah to the south. But Joel's focus is a devastating invasion of locusts. They swarmed the fields, they infested people's homes.

For Joel, this infestation is a symbol Yahweh's judgment. It may be a metaphoric reference to some military enemy. He speaks of the "Day of Yahweh," or, "The day of the Lord," first raised by Amos (5:18-20). Here is Joel's adaptation of that idea (2:12-13 NRSVUE):

> Return to the LORD your God,
> for he is gracious and merciful,
> slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
> and relenting from punishment.

Here is one of the earliest statements of the relationship between God's grace and human separation from God—a transition from an older understanding of God as vindictive and hard. Repentance—which simply means to turn around—to go back toward God—is not a pre-requisite for grace, but rather a response to grace:

> for he is gracious and merciful,
> slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
> *and relenting from punishment.*

Joel writes of an infestation of locusts—the destruction of crops—but in anticipation of a new crop which will sprout up where the locusts have destroyed.

For Joel this is about God's ultimate redemption; a time when the Spirit of Yahweh will endow all conditions of people: young and old, women and men, bonded and free— "all flesh" will be bathed—immersed—in the Spirit.

Remember Green Stamps? You got them when you shopped at certain stores, and you saved them up. And when you had enough, you could go to a "redemption center" and "redeem" your stamps for merchandise.

Here's the connection: Pentecost's other name is the "Festival of Weeks:" a celebration at the end of Spring Harvest—a time when gestation ceases and birthing occurs. It is both an end and a beginning: harvesting the Spring crop and planting the Fall crop—leaving behind what is past and launching what now is beginning; namely, New life where none was anticipated—"sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life!" Redemption.

The old hopes of a military messiah have been dashed! The cross ended that hope! But now, redemption appears in a new manifestation—new life—"sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life!"

And notice the inclusiveness of Pentecost: the list of places that begins in verse 9 encompasses a broad sweep of nations and ethnicities throughout the Graeco-Roman world. Amid apparent hopelessness, Redemption: available to all.

Last week our adult Sunday School class finished a curriculum written by our own Bill Lacy, based on his biblical and theological interpretation of the movie, "Field of Dreams."

In the movie, struggling Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella hears a voice: "If you build it, he will come." The voice tells him to build a baseball field in the cornfield beside his home. Ray's the only one who can hear the voice, and he's not sure why he's being singled out. Everyone thinks he's nuts. But he feels compelled to do what the voice tells him to do, so he builds the field, and in the process flirts with bankruptcy and the loss of his farm.

Baseball diamonds are special. I don't know; maybe it feels that way to me because baseball was the only sport I was able to play competitively. But the perfect symmetry of a baseball diamond not only is pleasing to the eye, but also is functional. The distance between each base is calculated to the speed of the runners against the velocity of a thrown or batted ball.

So, Ray builds a baseball field in his corn field. It eventually becomes apparent to him that its purpose is to provide a place for the ghost of Shoeless Joe Jackson to redeem himself. Shoeless Joe is one of the most tragic characters in baseball. He was an outfielder for the 1919 Chicago White Sox, the team that threw the World Series. Because of his association with the team, he was banned from baseball, despite his exceptional play in that Series. He led both teams in

several statistical categories and set a World Series record with 12 base hits. Doesn't sound like someone trying to throw the series! Nevertheless, he was banned, and died a forgotten man.

His guilt has been fiercely debated down through the years, and the movie sides with Shoeless Joe and assumes his innocence. In the movie, the ghosts of the 1919 White Sox emerge out of the corn field to play one last game, to give Shoeless Joe the chance to play out the series and redeem himself.

During the movie we discover that Ray and his father, John, were seriously alienated. John was a baseball fanatic and pushed Ray to be good. But Ray was drawn to things more creative—even artistic. His father pushed and pushed, until at the age of 17 Ray left home and never went back until his father's funeral, and he's carried a tremendous burden of guilt over that broken relationship.

As it turns out, John shows up on Ray's baseball field. Of course, Ray is shocked and disbelieving that he's seeing his father as he was before Ray was born. And Ray is afforded the chance to redeem his own relationship with his father.

At the end of the movie, Ray is recalling the voice that said, "If you build it, he will come," and he turns to Shoeless Joe and says, "It was you."

Shoeless Joe replies: "No, Ray. It was you."

Ray pursued his dream in spite of the skepticism of others, achieved something profound for a group of people he didn't even know, and in the process was rewarded with his own crack at redemption.

Redemption—new life—"sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life." For a people, maybe you and me, who maybe thought everything was lost, Pentecost offers the world a shot at redemption.