Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead
Acts 2:1-21, Pentecost Sunday, Year B
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I've always liked Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. You remember them, right? They're characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Prince Hamlet's childhood friends, and in the shady, psychological drama that crescendos between Hamlet and his Uncle Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attempt to jockey their way to favor and advance. But the two never really understand what's going on around them. They are darkly comical in that way. They have great self-confidence, and they perceive themselves to be working the system to their own advantage, passing secrets to Claudius while using velvet language to curry Hamlet's good graces. But their perception is all wrong. In truth, they are peripheral characters. The action they think they are influencing really swirls around them, buffeting them in ways they don't even recognize. They are sideshows in the story at best, not really part of it in any meaningful way. In the end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves on a ship as messengers ignorantly carrying a letter that instructs the King of England to kill them. After all their ludicrous machinations, they finally succeed in this, and an ambassador later reports back to Denmark the famous line, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead." And no one cares. The play's action simply continues as before.

As is so often the case, themes and characters in Shakespeare's plays resonate with Scripture. (In case you're interested, we'll be offering a Gathering course this fall all about the religious elements of Shakespeare's plays.) The bumbling, self-important, peripheral Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not unlike Jesus' twelve disciples. Though we tend to idealize the twelve, even a cursory reading of the Gospels exposes them as, well, bumbling, self-important, and peripheral. They get in the way and impede Jesus' ministry more often than they provide real support. When Jesus is exhausted, they badger him like backseat children pestering a wearied parent on a long drive. When Jesus patiently teaches them, they respond by arguing over who will be his top lieutenant. When Jesus, with a hopeful twinkle in his eyes, nudges them from the nest with a task for ministry, they return complaining that other good people are out there doing God's work and getting in their way. And finally, when Jesus is abducted on Maundy Thursday, the twelve flee like King Arthur's men in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. ("Run away!") At times the Gospel writers may intend for the twelve to provide some darkly comic relief. Like Costello to Abbot, they just can't grasp what Jesus is all about. It's as if Jesus

speaks a language they cannot comprehend. Despite the fact that they hear him so often, in many ways they are never really part of his story.

Until *today*. This is the pivotal day in the life of the twelve, in the life of the Christian faith, in the life of the Church. This is the day that peripheral characters become main characters. This is the day when the followers of Jesus learn to speak the language of his story.

The change is major, not minor. It's thunderous, not quiet. It's like the din of a bell banner unexpectedly processed into church, or the surprise of a Gospel text read simultaneously in a dozen different languages. *Every* expectation is upended. *Everything* changes. By just how much, we'll see.

Today the disciples gather in faith—not just the twelve, but 120 followers of Jesus that Luke has mentioned earlier in his Gospel. They congregate for the festival of Pentecost, fifty days after the Passover. And while they are together, the Spirit of God enters the house. The Spirit appears among them, flowing between and through them, *changing the atmosphere*, like the crackle of lightening on an unstable night. What had been merely a gathering place becomes *ekklesia*—church—and those who had been extras become main characters in the drama. This change is most potently manifest when the language of God's story—the language of the Spirit—becomes, quite literally, their language.

Disciples from all over the known world are there, and though at first they all seem to be babbling incoherently, slowly ears are opened and each person present can understand their words as if those words are being spoken directly to each heart. The language of the Spirit becomes a shared language, and it becomes on that day the language by which they all define their very lives.

Luke drives this home at the end of today's reading, when Peter stands up and speaks above the crowd. This is the same Peter who jockeyed for Jesus' ear by day and cowered in the shadows by night. The language by which Peter's life had been defined was all about how being a follower of Jesus might benefit Peter. But now he stands and gives voice not to the desires of his own heart but to the message of salvation. He calls upon all those present to listen and heed the Gospel. And the language Peter begins to speak on this day will be his language every day for the remainder of his life.

As with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as with the twelve disciples, so with us. We live, for the most part, as extras in God's story. We prioritize our lives according to languages other than God's: the language of economic prosperity and consumption, the language of epicurean desire and instant gratification, the twenty-first century American language of self-defining and

self-centered individualism that says *my* wants and comforts in life come first. We even co-opt God into the stories we weave with our language, giving him a supporting role and pretending that he conveniently wants for us all the same things we want for ourselves.

As with the disciples, the *language of God's story* strikes us as so odd we first consider it quizzically and then disregard it altogether. We come to church occasionally, but we're confused as to why. We try to pray every once in a while, but unless we're praying for things *we want*—co-opting God into our stories again—we're not sure the reason. We want our kids to be raised in faith (it seems vaguely important to us that they be), but the life of faith tends far down on our list of priorities.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attempted simply to graft Hamlet's drama into their own. The disciples attempted to interpret the Gospel according to the language by which they already lived their lives. We seek to compartmentalize our faith as one (usually minor) piece of us, alongside our jobs, our families, our extracurricular activities, our spare time.

But the Spirit doesn't work that way. The disciples learned on Pentecost that God will not be made a character in some other story. God's language is primary. *It* interprets *all else*, and not the other way around. The language of the Spirit binds people—the disciples in that house and us in this one—as more than acquaintances, more than friends…as a holy family. The language of the Spirit changes us from sidelines extras into main characters in God's drama. It's a language that redefines the way we do our jobs, the way we pray, the way we prioritize the things in our lives. It's a language that says, ***first***, "*I am God's*. His Spirit enters me, soothes me, shakes me. I am God's, first and foremost, and all the things in my life are an open response to his Gospel." When we speak this language to each other and to a hungry world, ears will open! When we speak with Peter's courage, lives will be saved.

Beginning on Pentecost, there is no part of the disciples' lives left untouched by God. His spirit permeates them like the very air they breathe. Never again will they run away. Never again will they quit in confusion.

Today, God's Spirit enters this place. This is the birthday of the Church. It can be your birthday in faith; it can be mine. This very day can be the day that you become a main character in God's story, in every part of your life. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead; in us the Spirit of God may come to life.

Amen.