

“Seekers and Sneerers”
Acts 2:1-24
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There are two kinds of people in the world, Seekers and Sneerers. Seekers and Sneerers. Seekers are those who ask, in the words of today’s story from Acts, “What does this mean?” Sneerers are those who say, in the words of the same story, “They are just filled with new wine, drunk before nine in the morning.” We’ve all met Seekers, people who view the cup of life as half full, rather than half empty like their Sneerer counterparts. We’ve all met Sneerers, people who begrudge any fun anyone but them wants to have, especially their Seeker counterparts. Are you a Seeker or a Sneerer? If you are a Seeker, put up your right hand. And if you are a Sneerer, put your left hand up. That’s right, the truth is, most of us have probably been both a Seeker and a Sneerer at some point in our lives, maybe even right now. I know I have, and usually it depends on what I’ve been through, what the situation may be, who I’m with. I’ve done my share of seeking and of sneering. I know I’m happier when I’m a Seeker, but being a Sneerer is a lot easier, ‘cause there’s a lot to sneer about in the world these days. Maybe makes that me a Sneaker. What kind of Sneaker are you? I’m a Nike.

And so I am thankful that the good news of the Gospel is that Christ died for both kinds, for Seekers and Sneerers, because God loves all people. But if I read my Bible a little more carefully, I see that I am called to be moving in the

direction of doing a lot more seeking, and a lot less sneering. You see, God has in mind for us to be seekers for all eternity, and to leave sneering for the devil. God wants us to be open to the possibilities of life in the Spirit, not threatened by them. God wants us to be striving for the finish line in faithfulness, not digging in our heels in fear. There's no victory in sneering, no life to be found there, it all just leads to brokenness and despair. But seeking leads us to beauty and community and abundant life, all the good things God wants for us. That's what we see in the story of Pentecost.

You heard the story, you heard how the disciples were gathered in one place and how they experienced the rushing, violent wind and the tongues like fire, and how they spoke in different languages, and how the people in Jerusalem were amazed that these poor, uneducated Galileans could speak languages they should have no ability to speak, but that the Spirit gave them ability. You heard listed all the places from which they spoke those languages, (and I'll give five dollars to anyone who can repeat all of them back to me in order and pronounced correctly). You heard that they were "speaking about God's deeds of power." And then you heard the responses of those who witnessed all these things. They were amazed and they were perplexed, and they were left with a choice: to approach or to retreat, to embrace life, or push it away, to seek, or to sneer. And so, some asked the question, "What does this mean?," in other words, "what can I learn from this

experience, is there something more about God's Holy Spirit I should know?" while others simply dismissed that which they did not understand, by categorizing as losers or sinners those who were acting a little different. Some sought, some sneered, some probably just sneaked away.

What is important for us is to note what Peter did with this opportunity he had been given by the Holy Spirit. You see, the Pentecost experience, as amazing as it was, was nothing more or less than an opportunity to tell the story of Jesus Christ. "Men of Judea," Peter says, "let this be known to you and listen to what I say." You see, even though Peter starts off with denying that the disciples are drunk, and seems to be answering to those who are sneering, I think he is really speaking to those who have asked, "What does this mean?," those who are seeking, who are open to hearing the word and coming into a deeper relationship with their God. Those who sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine," are those for whom no amount of preaching could ever bring them around. Perhaps some of these were convinced by Peter's sermon, but more likely they greeted the afternoon just like they greeted the morning: comfortable, yet cynical; curious but too afraid to risk showing it. Though it doesn't give a breakdown of the ratio of the seekers to sneerers that day, my strong hunch is that there weren't very many sneerers among the three thousand who were baptized and added that day.

Even though I'm being hard on sneerers, the seeker in me wants to believe that sneerers are just seekers in hiding, that their sneering is a mask to hide the fear of admitting that they really are seeking, and that they too can be won over to the knowledge of God's love for them. Some of you have seen the movie starring Robert Duvall called "The Apostle," about a preacher who is on the run for murdering his unfaithful wife's lover. Formerly the pastor of a big, thriving church, the Apostle E.F., as he calls himself to keep a low profile, finds himself called to start a small country church, a church filled with people who are more likely to ask "What does this mean?" than to sneer. But at one night's prayer meeting, one of those sneering types comes calling, unhappy that the Apostle E.F. has brought together a truly Pentecostal church, an integrated church in a segregated community, a community of joy and celebration in an area of despair. This sneerer picks a fistfight with the Apostle, and having been beaten like the dog that he is, runs off with his tail between his legs, issuing violent threats. The next Sunday, while the church is gathered for a picnic celebration, the sneerer returns with a bulldozer and a couple of his bully friends to tear down this church which has him feeling so threatened. But in a transformational moment, with the whole church behind him, the Apostle E.F. lays down on the ground in front of the bulldozer his open Bible and dares the sneerer to run over it. The bullies, obviously raised right by their mommas to fear the Lord, run away leaving the

lone and angry sneerer who must come down off the bulldozer to move the Bible. And as he leans down to pick it up, the Apostle takes him in his arms, and tells him that God loves him, that there is a place for him too in the Kingdom of heaven. The spell of anger and rage broken, the sneerer breaks down and repents, and is received into the company of the saints. Truly, there is hope for the sneerers in our midst.

At the same time, we also seek to follow Christ's advice to shake the dust off our shoes from the villages that will not receive us, to not throw pearls after swine, in other words, to be good stewards of the Word, to take it to those who may be open to hearing and receiving it, to sow it in good soil too, not just on the rocky path, as much as we might want the path to bear fruit. Sometimes we try so hard to make fruit grow where it never will, that we forget or don't have time to plant the seed where it is guaranteed to grow. We often invest too much in our weaknesses and too little in our strengths. It seems to me a wiser course to preach the gospel to those who are asking, "What does this mean?," let the sneerers sneer all they like, and pray that God brings them around. Indeed in the story I just shared, the Apostle first takes the sneerer out to the proverbial woodshed, gives him a good physical beating, and returns to preach the Gospel in fertile ground. And when at the picnic, this miracle happens and this man's life is changed, it was because the whole cloud of witnesses, the ones gathered up and raised up from

among those who would ask, “What does this mean?” stood their ground behind the Word of God that literally stood between their church and the means of its destruction. The more time we spend responding to sneerers on their own terms, the less we spend on sharing the story of Jesus Christ with those who are seeking him.

I celebrated a wonderful Pentecost once, a shared service between some uptight, white Presbyterians -- God’s frozen chosen -- and some really loud, dancin’ in the aisles, African-American Baptists, whom some might have thought were filled with new wine. The Baptist church was new in town and had approached us about a renting arrangement, not unlike what we have here with IBC, while they grew enough to be able to have their own building. After a couple of years, that day finally came and Pastor Willie and I thought it would be more than appropriate to hold a joint service together in their new building to celebrate the occasion. Pentecost seemed to be the perfect choice for such a celebration. You see, on the whole, each of the churches thought the other was missing the boat of worship completely, but there was still a deep respect for the faithfulness of each other’s traditions and experiences. Like in Jerusalem that day, only God could have brought together people *that* different. When this joint service was proposed to my church’s council, there were seekers and sneerers. There were long debates. There were reasons for and against. In the end, we

approved going forward with it and made provision to address as many of the sneerers issues as we could.

The day dawned and unfortunately, but as you might imagine, a relatively small number of the Presbyterians chose to embrace the opportunity to alter their Sunday morning routine, and the rest stayed home. Those who came were the ones who said, “What does this mean?” while the rest were those who said, “They are filled with new wine.” Those who came experienced the pouring out of God’s Spirit, much like the prophet Joel described. Those who stayed home slept in or read the newspaper. Those who came glimpsed the kingdom of heaven in all its fullness and diversity. Those who stayed home slept in or read the newspaper. Those who came celebrated the fact that the Spirit has given us ability to speak in different languages, to pray differently, to sing differently, to bring our tithes and offerings forward differently. Those who stayed home slept in or read the newspaper. I am so grateful that our church decided to be a seeker church for a day, and chose to preach to those who were willing to hear and to let those who wanted to sneer stay home and sleep in or read the newspaper. This is not to suggest that those members who did not go that morning were not faithful servants of Jesus Christ, but rather that those who did reaped abundantly the rewards of overcoming whatever fears they may have had about being in the presence of people speaking other languages and who asked the question, “What

does this mean?" By asking that question, they opened the door to receiving a greater understanding of God and of God's son Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.

I wish I had a good story to tell you about a sneerer who was redeemed at that joint Pentecost service, kind of like in the story from the movie, "The Apostle," but I don't. What I can tell you is what I truly believe, and that is that the seekers who did come that day are now far better prepared to deal with sneerers, and to be the kind of community that can see through the mask of a sneerer and proclaim to them that God loves both seekers and sneerers alike, just like in the story from "The Apostle." It is not giving up on the sneerers to preach to the seekers. It's just that without a community of seekers, the sneerers don't stand a chance. May God help us to seek the seekers, that we may be a community that lets the sneerers too know the Christ that Peter proclaimed that day of Pentecost. Amen.