

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Because of television, we don't have to come together to be together. By that I mean that people in different places, while watching television, can share in the same event from their different locations with many other people.

Way back in 1969, on July 20, an estimated 530 million people around the world watched on television as Neil Armstrong became the first person ever to walk on the moon.

530 million is a very large audience, but it pales in comparison to the TV coverage of a more recent sporting event – and I'm not talking football or basketball, baseball or hockey.

Great Britain's newspaper, "The Guardian," reported that one billion TV viewers watched the finals of the Cricket World Cup four years ago – yes, I said cricket!

But we can go even one better: Nielsen Media Research reported that the events of the August, 2008, Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, had 4.7 billion TV viewers! That 29th Olympiad lasted seventeen days – but, still, that's a pretty amazing number!

And by the standards of the ancient world, there was an amazing number of people in Jerusalem at the time of today's First Reading.

No, they couldn't watch TV, and their numbers certainly didn't approach anything like millions or billions, but there were Jewish people from all over the known world present.

Jesus' disciples were there, too, but not Jesus – he had ascended to the Father God. And everybody was there for the Jewish festival called "Shavuot." This festival has many other names, one of which is the Festival of Weeks because it happens seven weeks (a week of weeks) after Passover.

Shavuot is also called Pentecost, a word meaning "50th day," because it occurs on the 50th day after Passover. Shavuot is also called the Festival of the First Fruits, because in the Middle East, it is the time when the first agricultural produce of the season is gathered.

Historically, Shavuot also commemorates the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Being good Jewish men and women, they have come together to worship on this holy festival day. During their worship, they are miraculously overcome with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and quite a commotion ensues.

There is a rush of a wind and tongues of fire alighting on each of them, and they spill out into the streets and begin to talk in a way that is understood by everyone in the crowd.

No matter what language the visitors to Jerusalem speak, they understand what the disciples are saying about Jesus. The first gift of the Holy Spirit – the first fruits – is the ability to do exactly what Jesus had called them to do: proclaim the gospel to everyone.

For a farmer, the first fruits are a sign of what is to come. If the first harvest is of healthy produce, the farmer can reasonably expect a good season of reaping healthy fruits, vegetables and grains.

If, on the other hand, the conditions during the growing season have been less than ideal and the first fruits are puny and dry, then one might expect a difficult season to come.

A modern example of first fruits might be a prototype. When a new product or software is being considered, the manufacturer will sometimes let us consumers get a sense of how it will function when it is produced in full. The prototype is often not fully functional, but gives us an idea of that to which we might look forward.

In the world of television, first fruits could correlate to the pilot episode of a new series.

From the initial installment, viewers can decide if they want to invest time and effort into getting to know new characters and understanding their predicaments.

We get a sense of the style of comedy or drama to be expected in future episodes. Networks decide whether to begin airing a television series based on response to its pilot episode, the first fruits of the labors of the actors, writers, producers and all others involved in making the show.

In their experience of the Holy Spirit during this very special day of Pentecost, the disciples are given a glimpse of what they can expect.

Just a few verses earlier, Jesus left the disciples with these final words: “... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Wow! This handful of people was charged with telling the whole world about Jesus. How are they going to do that?

It must have seemed impossible. The followers gathered that day were relatively uneducated and mostly from the same part of the world. For the most part, they were blue-collar people – fishermen and tax collectors – who spent a great deal of their time just trying to eke out a living.

They were not people who knew multiple languages, who understood a variety of cultures.

They were not people who had traveled extensively. They were people poorly equipped to tell Jesus' story to the world.

Then on Shavuot, the Festival of the First Fruits, the Holy Spirit descends and shows them what they might expect going forward. They are given an extraordinary ability to communicate with people far different from themselves.

What they say that day is understood by people from that list of nationalities in verses 9-11 that symbolizes the then-known world, including some pretty remote areas.

This is a foreshadowing of what will happen in the years ahead in fulfilling Jesus' call. It wasn't that they would continue to be understood across language barriers in the literal way they were on that Pentecost, but that the Holy Spirit would be at work helping their message bridge cultural and other gaps.

Some of Jesus' followers will travel to the corners of the map, proclaim the Gospel and change the world. But on this Pentecost Day, the world comes to them, and everyone understands.

We've already noted that many of our cultural experiences today aren't as broadly shared as in decades past, but we still have more common ground than did those early believers with the cultures around them.

That band of Jesus' followers must have wondered how they could possibly fulfill Jesus' call to share the Good News with the whole world. There were so many barriers.

When it comes to sharing the Gospel, we may feel much the same way. We want experts – those with seminary or advanced theological training – to tell others about Jesus.

We talk ourselves into believing that we are unqualified to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, because we don't know enough about the Bible or the people we meet.

Sometimes we convince ourselves it would be better to say nothing than to say the wrong thing, to which we know we are far too prone. Other times we might feel inadequate not only in our preparation for the task, but in our personal spiritual journeys.

The followers of Jesus gathered there that day could have said much the same things. They could have pointed to all the differences. We watch different television shows, read different books, view different news channels and draw different conclusions about the meaning of what happens in the world and how to steer society. We are not a homogenous people.

On that Pentecost Day, though, the disciples were shown that with God's help, communication across barriers could happen.

On some level, it's true that we as a society don't share as many experiences as perhaps we once did. In our ever-more-fragmented world, we find it comfortable to cluster with people who think, look, and act much like us. But this is not our call.

On that Day of Pentecost, the disciples may have felt grossly inadequate to be the ones to tell what God had done for the world in Jesus Christ, to fulfill the call Jesus had put on their hearts with his parting words.

But they weren't called to be successful; they were called to be faithful, and to testify about the power of Jesus Christ to change their lives. The Holy Spirit would take it from there.

The same is true for us. Jesus loves us all, and we need to let the world know. And then we can count on God's Spirit to make the word penetrate to the hearts of those who hear us. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

Alan Goertemiller, Pastor
Pilgrim Lutheran Church of Indianapolis, Inc.