

“The Meaning of Pentecost”

Before Jesus ascended to heaven following His resurrection He told His followers to go to Jerusalem, to pray and wait for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This happened on the Jewish feast day called *Pentecost*. Pentecost was 1 of 3 important religious feasts for Jews. Jerusalem would be packed with worshipers who had come from far and wide to celebrate the event. Pentecost was primarily an agricultural festival, celebrating the close of the grain harvest. But it also commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses.

While Jesus’ followers were waiting and praying together in Jerusalem on this feast day the Spirit of God rushed into the room where they were gathered. Jesus’ followers had an encounter with the Holy – the divine - that defies adequate description. There is a violent, gale-force wind. Bursts of fire erupt, with flames burning over their heads. They begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit prompts them.

This gushing out of the Spirit had been predicted. John the Baptist said: “I baptize you with water...but after me comes one who is more powerful than I...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). Of course, the one whom he is referring to here is Jesus.

Jesus Himself told His followers that when He went away He would send the Holy Spirit to be with them and *in them* (John 14:17). And long before that, the prophet Joel prophesied that in the *last days* God would pour out His Spirit on *all flesh*. After the Spirit came, Peter preached about what had just happened, and he refers to this prophecy from Joel: “This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel, ‘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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy...then everyone who calls on shall be saved’” (Acts 2:16-18, 21).

The coming of the Holy Spirit in fullness and power made a tremendous difference in the followers of Jesus! Jesus had told them not to take the message about Him to the world until the Spirit came. They would need the Spirit’s power to do that. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). So they waited. And it happened! These timid, doubting disciples began to boldly tell everyone that Jesus had come back from the dead and that He was the Messiah!

This same power is available for any of us who follow Jesus today! The Holy Spirit, in us, can help each of us to share our faith with others. Not just as individuals, but as a church body. Our Visioning Team has been working hard to develop more outreach to the community and beyond to win people to Christ. But we can’t pull that off ourselves! However, if we pray for and allow the Holy Spirit to be in our efforts, it can happen!

But something else was happening at Pentecost. Notice Acts 2:4: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” They

spoke in other languages as the Spirit prompted them. “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’” (Acts 2:5-8).

Do you see what’s happening? People are there from many nations, speaking different languages, but they are able to hear what the apostles are saying in their own native tongue! It is like a United Nations meeting without interpreters and headsets! ***The language/communication barrier was overcome!*** Acts 2:11 says, “In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” There was *one language* proclaiming the mighty works of God!

Do you remember the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament? It is found in Genesis, chapter 11. “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there” (Genesis 11:1-2). This was in the very early days of humankind. There was one language. But human pride begins to take over, and look what happens: “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth’” (Genesis 11:4). “Let’s make a name for ourselves”. The New Living Bible renders this verse as: “Let’s build a great city with a tower that reaches to the skies – a monument to our greatness” They wanted to be right up their with God, exalting their greatness! But the next verse says, “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built” (verse 5). Notice, the Lord has to “come down” to see their tower: they hadn’t quite made it to the heavens! Then God puts an end to their self-promoting, egotistical scheme: He confuses their language and scatters the people! *So, people are divided, isolated from one another, unable to communicate – as a result of our sin and prideful attitude as human beings!*

Does that strike a chord as we think about life today? In so many ways we as humans are fractured, divided: unable to communicate with each other. (In spite of smart phones and instant messaging and high powered telecommunications!).

This is true of families. How many marriages are marked by poor communication between spouses? How often does a young person say, “I just can’t talk to my mom...I just can’t communicate with my dad”? Or a parent says, “My son and I just can’t talk to each other without getting angry”... “It’s like my daughter and I don’t speak the same language”

It’s true of the nation. Need I say that our country is painfully polarized politically. Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, can hardly talk to each other in civil fashion. We’ve come so far from September 11th, 2001, when the women and men of Congress stood on the steps of the Capitol Building and prayed and sang as a sign of unity. We watch news programs with people trying to talk over someone else without listening, even shouting at each other. Can’t we sit down and reason with one another, listen to one another, and work on creative solutions to the problems we face as a nation?

The world community is divided and often unable to communicate. It's interesting that the nations listed in the Pentecost account in Acts 2:8-10 represent some of the "hot spots" in the world today: Parthians, Medes and Elamites - groups representing modern Iran; Cappadocia, Phrygia, Pamphylia - modern Turkey; Mesopotamia - which covered some areas of today's Turkey and Egypt. Egypt and Libya are mentioned in Acts 2:10.

We still are like the days of Babel as the human family...splintered, disjointed, unable to communicate and get along. But do you remember what happened with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost? *It was the opposite of the Tower of Babel! People who spoke different languages could understand each other and hear of the mighty works of God!*

With the coming of the Spirit in fullness at Pentecost, the last days the prophet Joel spoke about had arrived! God was beginning a new creation! In the creation story in Genesis, the Spirit of God (or it could be translated "the wind of God") swept over the face of the waters, and ***creation*** began. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God (a mighty wind) descended upon the followers of Jesus, and ***the new creation*** began! God was beginning to bring people together around a common faith in Jesus and a unifying experience of the Spirit! Theologian Alan Richardson put it this way: "God wills to recreate humankind in one great family, united in one covenant of love through Jesus Christ, speaking one universal language of the Holy Spirit of God."

Someone has described very well how the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was a reversal of what happened in Tower of Babel: "The Tower of Babel had seen the proliferation of languages, with the resulting confusion and the division of the human family; Pentecost, with its many languages, began to see people united through a common understanding. At Babel God drove people apart to thwart evil; at Pentecost he brought people together to inaugurate righteousness. The tower was a symbol of our rebellion against God; Pentecost united people who were seeking God. The people at the tower of Babel wanted to 'make a name for themselves'; the people at Pentecost wanted to glorify the name of God. Babel was the imposition of human will; Pentecost was the acceptance of God's divine will. After Babel the people spread out over the earth in mutual hostility and alienation. It was every person for themselves. After Pentecost the people spread through the inhabited world to serve God and to live in love and fellowship. Babel was God's judgment on the people who tried to unite against Him. Pentecost was God's blessing bringing together people from every race, nation and language to live as one under God. The message of the people of Babel was: 'We are gods!' The message of the people of Pentecost was: 'We are God's.'"

*God brings people together when we put aside our human pride and self-seeking and allow the Spirit to work. And hear this: The Church is to be that community of the Spirit where we put aside our pride and self-will, and are united around God's purposes. ***Pentecost gives us a picture of the church as it is meant to be.*** Where people of different nationalities, languages, and persuasions can understand and care about each other. Where all varieties of persons are united around a common experience of the Spirit of Jesus and a unified desire to share the message of Jesus with the world.*

But often the Church isn't like this, is it? Yes, there are some congregations where people of different color and ethnic background worship and work together beautifully. But many congregations are made up of all white people or all black people, all English speaking or all Spanish speaking. I saw one of the most powerful expressions of how the Church is meant to be years ago in a Saturday night service at Upper Octorara Presbyterian Church near Parkesburg. It was charismatic service – an unstructured, free flowing serving where the Spirit moved. Gifts of the Spirit were being exercised. People spoke in tongues. People in the service stood up and gave prophecies. In that service were people literally from all over the globe. There was a beautiful blend of languages and cultures and denominational labels represented in that body.

We see many cases of disunity within the Body of Christ today, where believers can't communicate in a loving, understanding way. There are church fights, church splits. Often over petty things. I've seen some church fights that outdistance the world for nastiness and for hateful behavior. Some of this is happening in the United Methodist Church today over lesbian and gay issues. Reports I got from the special session of General Conference held in February seemed to indicate that delegates were no better than members of our national government in lobbying for their view, with last minute stall tactics, and even verbal attacks on those with differing views.

So today, Pentecost Sunday, is a good time to remind ourselves that God wants us within the human family to speak one language: the language of love. And this can happen through the unifying power of the Holy Spirit! Now if we read the New Testament, we see many miracles *after* Pentecost of the church bridging and overcoming the things that separated people from each other. For instance, in the early church you had slaves and slave owners, Gentiles and Jews, worshipping together, and sharing in the Lord's Supper as equals in Christ Jesus. But, if you read the New Testament carefully, you also see where some of the same old divisions and prejudices against others were hard to put aside. (Peter, for example, had to be scolded by Paul for backing off and refusing to eat with Gentiles).

So, the writer of Ephesians had to remind the sisters and brothers to always seek the unity that the Holy Spirit brings: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). Then they are reminded that there is only one Spirit, one faith, one God: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Human pride (represented in the Tower of Babel story) scatters and isolates people and breaks down communication. But when people are filled with God's Spirit, there is a power to bring us together through the universal language of love.

