

May 20, 2018—Pentecost  
 “Divided Tongues”

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Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, 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.  
 And I will show portents in the heaven above  
 and signs on the earth below,  
 blood, and fire, and smoky mist.  
 The sun shall be turned to darkness  
 and the moon to blood,  
 before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.  
 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "

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Happy Birthday everyone! Among the several significant aspects of Pentecost is the fact that today we mark and celebrate the birth of the church. Fifty days after the beginning of Passover, as other Jews from around the Mediterranean were gathering in Jerusalem for the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost, Jesus' followers were given the gift of the Holy Spirit and became the church. Pentecost as we celebrate it today in our church and as a Christian feast around the world, derives its name from that original feast day in Judaism when these events took place. Perhaps many of us primarily associate Pentecost not with the church's birthday but with the giving of the Holy Spirit. Both associations are of course correct. The point of highlighting each—the birth of the church and the giving of the Holy Spirit—is to proclaim clearly that from our perspective as the spiritual descendants of those original disciples we hear of today, the two go together. The church is born on the day that the Holy Spirit is given to Jesus' followers. The church lives in so far as the Holy Spirit is welcomed and received in the community of Christ's followers, then and now. Before that first Christian Pentecost, the disciples were just former followers of Jesus trying to figure out what to do next. Beginning that morning, about seven weeks after the life altering events of Christ's death and resurrection, at

about nine o'clock in the morning, as our text somewhat humorously details, that band of disciples was graced and commissioned with the Holy Spirit and became the church.

There are many little details that enrich this lengthy lectionary reading that resists further abbreviation, and we might start by noting Peter's defense of his fellow disciples. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit the disciples, all of whom were from Galilee and as far as we know would not have known or spoken any different languages besides Aramaic, started speaking in all kinds of languages. Among the various reactions of those who overheard them, including many from other nations who recognized their own native tongue being spoken by these Galileans, were those who scoffed and said that they had had too much wine. Peter, who clearly had never walked through a parking lot full of tail-gators at an American Football game replied, that's impossible, its only nine in the morning! It is hardly a self-evident, slam-dunk defense of their sobriety, this appeal to the early hour, but it does suggest to us something about the early church and their code of conduct regarding intoxication. Whether or not it also applies to the disciples on that historical day, an expectation of personal conduct that excluded the possibility of drinking in the morning seems to be taken as a given among the early generations of the church that wrote and preserved the whole account of The Acts of the Apostles.

Those who weren't scoffing were amazed to hear their own language spoken in Jerusalem. They had a much different experience and it is the one we tend to focus on in our rehearsing of this traditional narrative. There was no way for them to expect to hear their own language in Jerusalem, these pilgrims from far reaching places with names that are difficult to for any of us to pronounce. They had probably never heard of this Galilean Jesus, who had been executed seven weeks before at the beginning of Passover, and if they had heard of him, it was probably only in the passing small talk of travelers encountering locals who share random bits of news. So, those who heard their own language spoken that day by the sober disciples could not have expected the welcome they received and they would not have been looking for any of Jesus' followers to see what they were up to.

This seems to me to be an important point as it reflects the way that so many of us come to our faith, come to have faith after not having it, come to recognize and experience God's active movement in our lives even when we were not knowingly or intentionally seeking God or faith. The soon to be baptized who heard God reaching out to them through the speaking to their language by the disciples, like many of us from our own journeys, were beginning to hear answers to questions that they had not even asked. They were passing by and heard the sounds of home on the lips of these Galileans in Jerusalem. They weren't looking for Jesus or his followers. They weren't coming to be healed or to ask questions. But they found God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. And there was a part of them that was made whole that day in a way they had not before imagined possible. And they found workable answers and the value of better questions for pursuing their greatest need. I doubt that any of them found everything that they ever wanted, that they had answers that squeezed out all doubt and ambiguity. But they, as we do ourselves in our own journeys, found a workable understanding of things, had enough of a sense, be it intellectually or in more of a gut feeling sort of way, that they could take another step in this new direction, even if they did not know where it would lead them. Past our section of the reading this morning, at the end of chapter two, we learn that three thousand welcomed the message that day and were baptized.

While there's no way to really tell if the author of Acts, Luke, the same one who wrote the Gospel According to Luke, intended it or not, I think that the pairing of these two kinds of reactions communicates another important point. Where some heard and saw what they took to be country folk drunk in the morning, others heard and experienced God's love and welcome reaching out to meet them in their own particular language, their own situation, God providing enough for them to turn their attention and deepen their faith. People will hear things in different ways. This is true in every-day, real-life interactions with other people, and for all of us who receive the commission to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, we encounter the ways things are heard differently when we carry out the task towards which the whole of The Acts of the Apostles directs us. Where some will hear their own native tongue, spoken by a stranger as they move about in a foreign city, either as visitors or as people who live in their adoptive city of Jerusalem, others will hear gibberish and babble, and shout things like—"This is Jerusalem, we speak English here!" And in our interactions in everyday life, sometimes a person's patient and careful communication is received and experienced as condescension. And sometimes a genuine concern for another and their well-being can be experienced as presumptuous or intrusive. Sometimes we think we hear others saying things or speaking in a certain way that means one thing to us, when the exact same words and speech heard simultaneously by another could trigger the polar opposite reaction. Even within the church, where we can reasonably assume good intentions from all parties, we encounter situations where the same language or speech can be heard very differently, and sometimes with terrible consequences. We live out our faith in a culture that is plagued by the demonic power of white supremacy, and as such it is important for us to be mindful of this when we use biblical language of light and darkness, such as that which we find in the prologue of the Gospel according to John (the light enters the world and the darkness does not overcome it). And as Christians who live out our faith in a nation that has been shaped by the horrific history of slavery, liturgical language that draws upon metaphors of captivity and liberation from Exodus, might sound "traditional" or "biblical" from a place of privilege, even as that same language is wounding and unwelcoming to another.

There was this Yanni or Laurel thing going around recently, which helped highlight a part of this phenomenon—where we will hear certain things one way and another exposed to the same sounds will hear something different. It highlights, in a less serious way I think, the need for humility and patience when relating to another, particularly in those situations that feel difficult or impossible or hopeless. Maybe that other person or those other people are hearing and feeling the same sounds we do, but what they hear is something quite different, and through no fault of theirs or ours, with no winners or losers, it's just broken communication. To be clear, there are times when we make mistakes, or others make mistakes. There is language that needs to be corrected and for which we must take responsibility. I do not mean to suggest that we are helpless or innocent or lack all agency in communicating with each other. But there are circumstances when each of us might hear the same sounds, but the meaning of those sounds and take away for each of us from that experience is quite different.

For Christians within the new church established by the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit, one of the ways we have interpreted these events we celebrate today is to see in them a kind of reversal of the punishment inflicted on those who built the tower of Babel. Where the one unified language among humans enabled the prideful endeavor to reach up into the divine realm

of heaven, the punishment God bestowed upon them was to scatter human beings and divide them into different languages, thereby making such a project less likely in the future. At Pentecost, God gives the Holy Spirit and one of the Spirit's gifts is to enable us to understand one another across the barriers of divided language, and we can add, across the divide of experiencing the same sounds differently. And so here we find not the creation of one language but the gift of God reaching each one in their own language, through one of the disciples who has willingly submitted themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit. If we are going to recognize the reversal of Babel here we must also recognize the reversal in the disposition of our various ancestors in the faith, from prideful and glory seeking to freely choosing to become obedient to God. In this we can see humility, not as a kind of submission or abdication of our agency, but as a kind of approach to interacting with one another under the influence of God who is clearly greater than any of us, humility as a kind of precondition for receiving the gift of the Spirit. The dispersion of the people into different languages after the Tower of Babel is reversed at Pentecost because God chooses to give us this gift, and those persevering disciples were willing to receive it in humility. In doing so those worn out, uncertain of what to do next disciples became something new. By the power of the Holy Spirit they were brought together to become the church.

Pentecost is a celebration of the Spirit, the celebration of God's persistent love for us despite our obstinance, despite our distraction and lack of interest, despite our outright rejection at times, our refusal to welcome God into the center of our lives. Pentecost is a day of birth and resurrection, new possibilities without the burden of correcting all that needs to be corrected in the past, and new life that neither ignores nor glosses over the wounds with which we are risen, but transforms them into something that brings life to the world and glory to God. So, Happy Birthday to us, the church, we as otherwise scattered and uncertain individuals who want to follow Jesus, and are brought together by the Holy Spirit and under the Spirit's guidance, become something new, the church. And praise be to God for calling us into this ongoing project of the Holy Spirit. May we continue to be blessed and challenged by its leading presence among us. May we continue to recognize and celebrate the God-given diversity that is evident when we gather, a richness of human experience and insights, new beginnings and second chances, that deepens each one of our limited individual understanding of God and the world in which we live out our faith. As we continue on the journey as people of the resurrection, may we continue to invite and embrace and make room for the Holy Spirit to rule among us. Amen.

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