

“Spirit Scattered and Sown”

Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 2012

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur (Disciples of Christ), Georgia

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Genesis 11:1-9

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. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 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." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2: 1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like

the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit;

and they shall prophesy.

19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,

blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Acts 2: 1-21

José Lingongo (French):

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Mary Frances Early (English):

³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Vivianne Aponte (Spanish):

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Betty Brewer-Calvert (English):

7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

Phuong Nguyen (Vietnamese):

12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

13 But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

José Lingongo:

14 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. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

Phuong Nguyen:

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Mary Frances Early:

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

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and your old men shall dream dreams.

18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,

in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Vivianne Aponte:

19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,

blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

**Everyone in unison, speaking whatever language you
choose:**

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

God has scattered and sown a mighty Spirit upon the fields of God's people.

There is a sweet, sweet Spirit across the universe and in this sacred place.

Just yesterday afternoon we hosted a lovely wedding.

A local chef and an administrator fell in love,

and they chose this sacred space to celebrate their joy.

Let me tell you,

they have so much joy it is contagious, catching and fetching.

Spend 90 seconds in their presence

and you will find yourself grinning a silly grin and feeling so good.

Just before the wedding ceremony was to begin

we received word that the band wasn't coming.

We had no other musician lined up,

and there we were.

A hastily downloaded CD of wedding music we made in five minutes just didn't take,

so I made an announcement before the ceremony would begin.

“Folks, for reasons beyond our control or understanding the band is not here.

But that will not lessen our joy or this celebration of love,

for we have all caught the joy of this loving couple.

For today we will be like the Church of Christ – no instruments and a lot of soul.

We're going to let the music of love fill our hearts and this sanctuary.

Let us worship the Living Christ.

Can I get an Amen?!”

Well, everyone was grinning and happy and standing quietly

as the bride began to walk down the aisle.

Suddenly a groomsman began to hum Wagner's "Bridal Chorus"

a.k.a., "Here Comes the Bride"

and so the Best Man and I joined in

and the bridesmaids added the melody

and soon the whole church was
happily humming

and singing, "Dum dum da da,
dum dum da da..."

We didn't have a band, but we knew the language of love.

God's language of love

overcomes silences and separation

while uniting us in a common understanding

that changes lives and the world.

Listen again to the opening of Acts, chapter 2.

When the day of Pentecost had come,

they were all together in one place.

2 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.

*3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,
and a tongue rested on each of them.*

*4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in other languages,
as the Spirit gave them ability.*

The first church needed this spirit then,
and the church needs this spirit today.

“The [Christian] community without the spirit is dead.

The church cannot speak the truth but for the Spirit of God.

[However] with God’s Spirit we are alive and united in
Christ.”

(New
Proclamation,
Page 76.)

The Spirit of God is given to the whole people of God.

The Bible teaches us that

*“Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,
and a tongue rested on each of them.”*

In effect, God gave a gift of passion and purpose and unity,

saying, “You are not alone; I am with you, and I will set your
life on fire!”

My friends, “You are not in this alone; the Spirit is with you.

You are not alone – this is God’s promise and invitation.

But know as well that you cannot experience this gift in isolation.

The Spirit is also with all those around you joined by Christ’s name as one.

The Spirit is God’s communal gift.” Jacobson, p. 76.

One of the gifts of the Spirit is the gift of understanding,
which fosters and builds community.

The more we work and play at building community, at *Koinonia*, at fellowship,

the more we discover what we share in common.

And at the same time, the less we fear one another.

Thanks to the Spirit of God at work in Christian community,

we can release the fear of being honest and authentic and real

because we seek to be a Christ-like community that understands.

We can release our fear of bringing into the light

that which lies hidden in the dark recesses of our souls.

Thanks to the Spirit of God we can finally let go

of the perceived need to project images of perfection.

Preachers and Pastors and Apostles, let go of that foolish notion of perfection,

'cause Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Baker let the cat out of the bag.

Everyone knows you and me ain't perfect.

Get over yourselves and get busy listening and serving.

My friends, each of us can let go being right all the time,

and instead seek to be reconciled.

We can lay down at the Table of the Lord our selfishness and greed,

and pick up a morsel of bread that reminds us to serve and share.

Maybe, just maybe what the world needs

is more altars and fewer towers.

Consider what happened to the builders of the Tower of Babel:

Genesis reads,

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."

The Lord came down and observed their selfish, self-centered activity,
and then *“the LORD scattered them abroad
from there over the face of all the earth,
and they left off building the city.”*

In the book of Genesis, people of faith seek to build the Tower of Babel;

in the book of Acts of the Apostles believers seek to build the Church.

At Babel everyone speaks the same language, yet divides;

at Jerusalem everyone speaks different languages, yet unites.

Is Pentecost the antidote to Babel?

As common courtesy and civility get posted on the endangered species list,

are you like me, wondering if all is truly lost...

or whether we need to roll up our sleeves

and get busy... get busy listening and understanding.

A few weeks ago in a sermon I quoted John Lennon who said,

“What’s so funny about peace, love, and understanding?”

I got a number of emails from folks who said Elvis Costello said that.

Yes, Elvis Costello did sing it, as a nod to his mentor John

Lennon.

At the Doc Chey restaurant by Emory University

the motto is Peace Love Noodles. It's all good.

A Pentecost-like experience is seen in John Sayle's film *Matewan*.

Matewan is the story of a strike and shootout

at a West Virginia coal mine in the 1920's.

When pacifist union organizer Joe Kenahan comes to town

he finds terrible disunity.

The native West Virginia strikers are angry at the Italians,

imported by the mine owners as strike breakers.

When the Italians, former shoemakers, prove inept at mining,

the owners bring north African-American families from Alabama.

Joe Kenahan is a true Christ figure

even though he claims no religious affiliation.

Joe talks to all three groups of people

– the local miners, the Italians, and the folks from Alabama –

into joining together.

Their growing unity is symbolized in the film by music.

A local fiddler listens to an Italian playing a haunting tune,

and then takes it up and joins in the song.

And then an African-American joins in on his harmonica.

The three musicians are soon performing in perfect harmony.

We see a West Virginian mother take food to the home of an Italian family

whose children are hungry and have nothing to eat.

The hungry and grateful family invite their newfound savior to stay and eat with them.

Even though they speak different languages,

when they sit down together to break bread,

they are able to communicate

because they do understand the language of love,

the practice of radical hospitality,

and the gift of divine grace

that overcomes evil and separation.

As is true in most social change movements,

the men follow the women's lead,

and they do so by beginning to teach one another the game of baseball.

As bread is broken and baseballs are tossed and caught and smiles are

shared,

we see that not only is it possible for the language of love
to overcome the barriers of prejudice and greed,
it is the only thing that does.

Has the Church *really* been given the gift of understanding?

Is this a gift we really want? Or is this a gift we tried to give away or
give back to God?

Does the Church want to be a channel of spirit-filled dialogue
in the midst of cultural diversity?

Do we seek to be a conduit for reconciliation and righteousness
grounded in what we share in common,
rather than in some neurotic need to be silent and safe
and passive?

Does the church of Jesus Christ today
have what it takes
to dare to be a conduit of understanding and grace in
action?

Or are we fearful, afraid of failure, afraid of being told no, afraid of
loss,
afraid of controversy, of making ripples, even afraid of fear
itself...?

...so afraid we refuse to use the gift of grace

that is dancing and alit in our souls!

What would happen if we took a risk

and let the miracle of understanding

come alive again,

letting the Holy Spirit take over,

open our ears and hearts and doors and then see what happens.

Can you imagine that? Imagine that!

Can you imagine that maybe, just maybe the Holy Spirit

will help us to listen as well as to speak the truth in love

in the midst of diversity and division and Decatur?

Can you imagine the world around us hungering, thirsting, dying,

being born again from above, grateful for this gift?

The Spirit of understanding is given to the whole people of God.

“The Spirit does not speak a different message

for each spiritual seeker – *you find your truth and I’ll find mine.*

A quest for spiritual truth that would isolate us from our neighbors

is flawed at the outset.

The miraculous gift of Pentecost resides in our discovering our commonality.”

(New Proclamation,

When a disciple of Jesus Christ named Barbara Johnson

found out that she had cancer,

Barbara took it upon herself to share in her church

and with friends in other congregations

her painful struggles and small
victories.

Barbara's openness and authenticity and humor

in the face of human frailty and brokenness

gave other's permission to be open with their own
lives.

She got cards and calls from people with similar concerns,

people seeking out a neighbor to share their stories.

One woman wrote that while she was recovering from cancer she
wore a wig.

She was with her 4-year-old grandson one day

when her scalp started itching...beneath the wig.

"This thing is driving me crazy," she said,

so she reached up and yanked off the wig.

The little boy exclaimed, *"Wow, Grandma, you've got trick hair!"*

Another friend wrote Barbara to say that

while she was in her bathroom putting in her contact lenses,

she saw her prosthesis lying on the counter
and her wig soaking in the sink.

She thought, *“This isn’t a bathroom. It’s a used parts department!”*

Her thoughts may be applied to the church of Jesus Christ.

We are not a museum for saints.

We are a used parts department.

We’ve got people who have been used and abused and misused.

We’re inclusive of some folks who feel all used up and burned out,
neglected, rejected and dejected.

We have a long line of members and friends

who were so hurt before

yet have found through the church new healing and
hope.

Many of our used parts have found new usefulness

in areas and ways they never imagined,

and in the process have discovered joy and meaning.

We don’t call ourselves used anymore; we’re
Pre-Owned.

If you get up real close these used parts they might not look like
much.

We may be a bit bent.

We are not shiny or fancy.

We certainly aren't successful in the eyes of high society.

Living has honed our sharp corners.

Serving one another has smoothed the rough patches.

Let me invite you to take a few steps back to look at the overall effect,
at the collective beauty and ministry of these used parts.

Look closely once more,

and you will see the miracle of peace, love and understanding
being removed from the endangered species list.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!