

## ***“Persons of Influence: Class of 2017”***

Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017

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

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### **Acts 2: 1-21**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

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

*<sup>17</sup> ‘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.*

*<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit;*

*and they shall prophesy.*

*<sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,*

*blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*<sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.  
<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

## **The Language of Love**

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.  
This Spirit has the power, the capacity, the will to set our lives afire and aglow.

Recently in this sanctuary we hosted a lovely wedding.  
A local chef and an administrator had fallen in love,  
and they chose this sacred space to celebrate their joy in one another.  
Let me tell you,  
they had so much joy it was contagious, catching and fetching.  
Spend 90 seconds in their presence  
and you'll be just like me, grinning a silly grin and feeling so good.

Just before the wedding ceremony was to begin  
we received word that the band they booked to play in the service wasn't coming.  
We had no other musician lined up.  
There we were.  
When in doubt, turn to the internet.  
We attempted to download wedding music unto a CD.  
It just didn't take.

When the ceremony was about to begin,

I announced to the gathered family and friends:

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

*That fact will not lessen our happiness or this celebration of love,*

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

*We may not have instrumental music; we do have, however, 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, as the bride began to walk down the aisle

everyone beamed and quietly stood still.

Suddenly a groomsman began to hum Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus”

a.k.a., “Here Comes the Bride.”

The Best Man and I joined in

and the bridesmaids added the melody

and suddenly the whole church was happily humming and letting loose,

*“Dum dum da da, dum dum da da...”*

The moment was magical.

We may not have had a band.

What we did have was the tune and tone of the language of love.

Whenever the whole people of God choose to speak lovingly,

to give voice to words of comfort and hope, mercy and justice,

to express themselves in ways that are kind and life-giving,

the Spirit of God is set loose in our midst

to unite us via the language of love.

God’s love creates magical moments and mysterious movements.

## **The Language of Love**

We need this gift of God, the language of love that unites people as one,  
and we need it here and now.

The graduates and their families present in our sanctuary today  
know the wisdom and worth of the language of love.

Today we are honoring our graduates in the Class of 2017.

To our graduates we say that what you have done is no small thing.

You have earned and achieved a mighty accomplishment.

To our graduates we express our pride in you.

We acknowledge that you invested effort and energy, creativity and cognizance,  
practice and preparation to reach your goal.

To our graduates we applaud how far you have come.

We pause with you this moment, this plateau, this stage of life to celebrate;  
we cannot wait to see what is next!

For now, however, we'll enjoy the experience.

As we bask in the glow,

let's give thanks to God

that you are beneficiaries of those who have shown you the way.

Persons of interest and influence shaped you, molded you, engaged you.

The Spirit of God sent good folks your way to help you, to push you to excel,

to guide you, to teach you, to pat you on the back, to wipe away your tears,

to applaud your efforts, to drive you in spirit and in the car to practice.

As we bask in the glow of your accomplishment,

the Spirit of God will send you forth to grow and go forward.

Effective here and now and forevermore you are persons of interest and influence.

Let's give thanks to God that you will have ample opportunities

to show someone else the way forward, the way through,

the way around, the way over, the way ahead.

Class of 2017, we're going to go out on a limb and take a wild guess

that your greatest influences and constant supporters and biggest fans

were folks whom you believe and trust actually, truly love you.

You know they cared for you because they were there for you,

they had your interest at heart, and because the language they used

– body language and spoken language – was loving, heartfelt, authentic.

Rarely do we encounter a truly self-made person...because it's a myth.

No one is an island.

No one stands alone.

The reality is that we need each other.

The Good News is we have one another, here in Christ's church.

The spiritual gift which empowers us to live into

who we are called to be and share in community

is the language of love.

**God's language of love** overcomes silences and separation and subjugation,

all the while uniting us in a common understanding

that changes lives and the world.

Observe that when God birthed the church, the first – and greatest -- gift of God

was our capacity to listen to one another,  
that we might understand the language of love.

Listen again to the opening of Acts, chapter 2.

*When the day of Pentecost had come,  
they were all together in one place.*

<sup>2</sup> *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.*

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

<sup>4</sup> *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; you are my extended family. Love one another!*”

*Watch while I will set your life on fire and aglow!”*

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

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

[Please] 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.

As the Class of 2017 has already figured out,

when we know someone is trustworthy,

that we are loved as we are,

we set aside our fears and grow in faith and wisdom.

### **The Language of Love**

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 1920s.

When pacifist union organizer Joe Kenehan 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.

Even though Joe Kenehan claims no religious affiliation, he is a true Christ figure

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, 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.

Graduates in the Class of 2017, family and friends, Church of Jesus Christ,

God gave you a gift of passion and purpose and unity, saying in effect,

*"You are not alone; you are my extended family. Love one another! Watch while I will set your life on fire and aglow!"*

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