

“Pentecost Understanding” GPPC 6-9-19
Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21

A pastor tells about a little girl, maybe five years old, who came forward for the children’s sermon on Pentecost Sunday. She was wearing her Sunday best, and her parents sat on the second row. And the pastor began to tell the great story of Pentecost—divided tongues as of fire, people speaking in other languages, drama. He was about halfway through his story, and he says, “The young girl stood up, looking towards her parents, put her hands on her hips, and in a loud whisper said, ‘I don’t believe a word of it!’” (“An Impossible Impossibility,” Joseph S. Harvard III in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2019, 8.)

Well, it *is* a lot to believe, isn’t it?

Luke, the writer of Acts, describes an amazing scene. The day of Pentecost has arrived. As one Bible scholar explains, “The Day of Pentecost (fifty days after Passover) was also known as the Feast of Weeks, an agricultural festival in which the community celebrated the gathering of the first harvest (wheat) and offered thanks to God for nature’s bounty (Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18-24)....By the first century

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C.E., the Day of Pentecost had become primarily a celebration of God's gift of the law of Moses to Israel." (Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts: The Westminster Bible Companion*, 34.)

So we can see that the people's understanding of Pentecost has already shifted over the centuries. And it's getting ready to shift a lot more.

The twelve apostles (with Matthias added to replace the departed Judas) are gathered all together in one place—we assume, for worship. And then all heaven breaks loose when the Spirit shows up to the party. The sound of a violent wind. Tongues as of fire (whatever that means!). People filled with the Holy Spirit and they're suddenly able to speak in other languages. It's impressive, but it's also not completely clear what's going on. Some people even think these folks have gotten drunk, before 9:00 a.m. at that!

But a few things are clear. Not only are the people suddenly able to speak in other languages but more important they are able to *understand* each other in their native language. And they don't just understand each other so that they can discuss the weather or baseball scores. No. They

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are empowered to speak and hear about “God’s deeds of power.” In other words, the Spirit calls them together into a life-changing faith community that proclaims God’s power.

A pastor tells about her ministry in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, maybe the least active population for church participation in the entire country. It’s not that people who live in that area hate the church. It’s that they simply are not involved in any voluntary organizations, much less God’s organization called church. The pastor says, “Last year, one of my colleagues ran into a group of our confirmation students’ parents out at dinner and invited them to church. ‘Oh, thanks,’ one mom responded in a friendly tone. ‘But, honestly, everything is going fine. We just don’t need church.’” (Kristy Farber, “Preaching Pentecost in a Secular Context” in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2019, 2.)

Well, even though you and I live in the Southeast United States, one of the more overtly religious areas of the country, I suspect that same conversation could happen here too. The assumption is that being Christian is something you do alone. Christian community and worship are unnecessary add-ons.

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But the Spirit has other ideas. The Spirit sneaks up on those people gathered at Pentecost, and calls them together in community. Unbidden, the Spirit grants people the ability to proclaim “God’s deeds of power.” And the Spirit grants people understanding. And though that first Pentecost was special, Pentecost still happens every day. Do you know what I mean?

We had a bunch of committee meetings the other night. And I imagine people who are not in the church might think church committee meetings are about as much fun as cleaning the litter box. But that’s not usually the case. (Sometimes it is, but not usually!) In fact, if you were to walk down the hallway past the classrooms where the meetings are held, odds are good you’d hear people talking and laughing and genuinely glad to see each other. You would find people sharing experiences of God at work in their lives and ideas for how to share God’s love with the church and with the world.

In one meeting the other night, we talked about all the different groups of people in our church that we are caring for: military personnel, older adults, college students, people who are sick, people who are

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grieving, people who cannot get out to worship anymore and who want somebody to come and sit with them and talk with them and give them Holy Communion. We sat in a room and talked about how we are caring for these folks, and how we might do even more. And it was just beautiful.

In another meeting the other night, we talked about how to be more inviting and hospitable to our neighbors. How did our community festival go? Would we do it again, or do something different? What went well and what might be improved? What if we did a mission walk around our neighborhood and tried to look at it with the eyes of the living Christ?

And while we were having these conversations, some youth came through the doors into the room as they made their way into the kitchen. They apologized about six times for interrupting us, even though nobody was upset. These youth were coming back to the church after serving food to the poor. And why in the world would they do that? Don't they have other things to do with their lives? Of course they do. But, you know, the Holy Spirit keeps calling the church together, giving people

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the ability to proclaim “God’s deeds of power” sometimes with words, sometimes with actions, and sometimes with both.

And then there are those times when people in the church talk about things that are hard and controversial, such as, say, gun violence and gun regulations, as we will discuss after church today. And you know how the world is these days. The standard view seems to be that if we disagree about something, then we have to hate each other. Or we have to be silent about controversial issues, because heaven forbid that anybody might have honest dialogue about something important. Or we have to avoid each other and give up on each other and quit the church.

But then there’s that pesky Spirit again. The Spirit enables people to come together and talk, and sometimes even have vigorous disagreement, but still love each other and still show up for each other.

It’s countercultural. And it’s a miracle.

This is what Ava is getting herself into, you know. Jumping into this messy and wonderful church that God called together at the first Pentecost and God still calls together every day. We hope that Ava, and that we, will be granted understanding and community and commitment,

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and the ability to proclaim God's deeds of power with our words and deeds. That's what we hope for Ava and for the whole church—God's Pentecost understanding. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal