

Overcoming Babel – Pentecost Sunday

Scriptures: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost

Today is Pentecost – we call it the birthday of the Church. I think sometimes that when we hear of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost, we have some faulty thinking that that's when the Holy Spirit sort-of "popped" into existence. The Holy Spirit's been around a long time – He's God, actively involved and present in the world. Sometimes we fall into the same flawed thinking about Jesus – that He wasn't around until Christmas. Yet the Scriptures show the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit throughout the Old Testament.

The ancient church asserted the eternal existence of the Triune God in all the fullness of His being. *The Nicene Creed* says in part, "We believe in one God, the Father,... We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,... We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified," (*UMH*, 881).

Our understanding of Pentecost is faulty in the same way. We assume that Pentecost happens because the Holy Spirit comes. But Pentecost had previously been a Jewish holiday and religious festival, called the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Harvest, and the Day of First-fruits. It was a worship service the people observed to thank God for all that He had done for them. They would go to Jerusalem to give offerings of their first-fruits – and this is real different than how we do things, of giving our offerings out of our abundance – they gave to God the first tenth of everything they grew and harvested, and then they got to keep the rest. They gave what they gathered first to God, and the leftovers were theirs to do with as they pleased. So that's the background of what's going on in the beginning of our passage today. The disciples are in Jerusalem to give their first-fruits – their tithes – to God at the Temple, after Jesus had ascended into Heaven on a cloud ten days earlier, and promised to send His followers a helper. Turn with me to Acts 2:1-21, so we can see what happens on that particular Pentecost, and why it's been called the birthday of the Church. I'll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Acts 2:1-21.**

God's Presence

There's something unique about this particular Pentecost, compared to the Pentecosts which came before it, and that's the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us, "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting," (verse 2). The "they" Luke refers to here are the eleven apostles. They hear and feel a violent wind in the house.

There are a few times in Scripture where God shows He's present through the wind. And then, "they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them," (verse 3). There are two places I can think of, off the top of my head, where God shows His presence through a fire which doesn't burn – when He speaks to Moses from the bush, and when He used a pillar of cloud and fire to lead the Israelites to the land of Canaan. God shows up through wind and fire in various places in the Old Testament.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them," (verse 4), Luke records. The Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in languages they hadn't learned before. Who did they speak to? Luke tells us. He writes, "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language," (verses 5 and 6). All these people are shocked – they're surprised. They're hearing something being told in their native languages that they've never heard before.

Aren't These Galileans?

They were "utterly amazed," by this, (verse 7a), to Luke's own words. And of course, then they begin to question, "Aren't these men Galileans?" In reading the Gospels and the Book of Acts, I'm convinced that there were some deep-seated prejudices that people had in those days – between Gentile and Jew – but also between Jews of different geographic regions. Galilee is at the northern end of the modern-day State of Israel, while the Temple and the events recorded in our passage today occur in the city in Jerusalem, in the southern section of the country. See, to get from Galilee in the north, to Jerusalem in the south, you have to pass through a section of the country known as Samaria. Remember Jesus' parable about "the Good Samaritan?"

Jewish people in those days didn't think Samaritans could be "good," and apparently they also must have thought that nothing remarkable or noteworthy could come from Galilee! In fact, Nathaniel – a future apostle from Galilee – asks his friend, Philip, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) when told about Jesus Christ. The people in Jerusalem on this specific Pentecost couldn't believe what they were hearing. 'How is it that each of us hears them in our own language?' (Acts 2:8).

See friends, God – the Holy Spirit – did a remarkable thing with the followers of Jesus Christ who were in Jerusalem that day, and that's why Pentecost has been called the birthday of the Church. He made them speak languages they'd never learned to speak before, and I suspect, they probably couldn't speak them after He was finished doing His work through them. Luke gives us a list of those languages. Now, if each of those listed in Scripture is a separate and distinct language, then we

have a list of close to fifteen different languages being spoken all at once (verses 9-11). And guess what they were talking about in these languages they didn't know!

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Jesus! They were telling all the people about what God had done for them through Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected! "We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (verse 11) the people say. Jesus dying for our sins, and coming back to life to show us He's capable of making and keeping the promise to bring us to Himself – that, friends, is the wonders of God the followers were talking to them about that day. How do we know that – well, you've got to read on further in the chapter to see it, around verse 41, three thousand people were baptized and joined the Church that day.

Now I've spoiled the end of the chapter for you, but I want to take a look at something else here. Peter and the other apostles, they had critics bashing them even then. When people are doing great things – helpful things for other people – there will always be those who think they've got ulterior motives. They're pessimists. They find the negative in every situation. Look what they do. "Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine,'" (verse 13). In other words, "Don't pay any attention to all that gibberish – they're just drunk, they don't know what they're even saying." See, to these folks, all the various languages sounded about as intelligible to them as all the chatter that day at the Tower of Babel. It was just some guys babbling to them. They didn't know what was going on. They weren't plugged in, and weren't interested in finding out the truth, either, because they already had their minds made up about it.

Do you think you could speak another language that you'd never learned before and make sense to the hearers of it, if you were drunk? I don't think so. For years, Ohio students had to have at least a year of foreign language to graduate. Even sober, it's a tough accomplishment to become conversational in another language, let alone literate in it!

American Church

Peter responds, "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!" (verses 14 and 15). He explained to the people that God had sent the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of those who follow Jesus. That's something we need to be mindful of, especially in the Church today, as divisive and fractured as it is. See, the Church in America is in a sad condition.

People have ditched faith in Jesus Christ, and His commandment to love others – and sometimes loving others, especially those who aren't like us is tough. They've replaced it with faith in a false Jesus who's first allegiance isn't to the Father and the

restoration of relationship through the cross, but rather to the political establishment – and that’s both Republicans and Democrats – for survival. Both major parties in this country would have us believe that Jesus would support their position on various social issues. They’ve swapped the Jesus of the cross and empty tomb who restores and gives life, light, and hope to the downtrodden, with a patriotic, American-flag waving Jesus who’s more “good ol’ boy,” than Son of God.

I just wrapped up fifteen years in mostly public schools. State supported schools. Never once have I been discouraged from praying on my lunch break. I’ve kept a Bible in a desk drawer for the last decade, and have read it during my lunch break. Never once have I ever been told to put it away, to hide it from students, or anything else of that nature. Schools, for the most part, are tolerant places – and have to be, or they risk losing funding. Yet there are folks, not in the educational system, who paint pictures of doom and gloom, seeking to use fear to manipulate people into thinking that “God’s not allowed in schools.” It’s one of the most absurd things I’ve heard. God is God. We aren’t. Sometimes when we’re trying to hold on the coattails of that flag-waving Jesus, we lose sight of this, and begin to think that we’re all “gods,” and know all, and as much as, He does!

If They’re Willing – God Will Use Them

Peter recalls some verses from the Old Testament prophet Joel, written hundreds of years before the Holy Spirit comes, which would have been very familiar with the audience that day. Joel had written, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy,” (verses 17-18). Peter realized that the Holy Spirit – God’s Spirit – had been poured out on all people. Did it matter to God if the person was a man or a woman? No. He’ll use them if they’re willing. Did it matter if they were old or young? No. God will use people of every age and stage of life if they’ll let Him. Does it matter if they’re rich or poor? No. He says He’ll even use servants – we’d say slaves – if they’re willing to be used by Him to spread the Gospel.

Every type of person, every shade of skin, if they’re following Jesus Christ, God can and will use them – if they let Him. Now, that being said, we have to get into a mode where we say, with Christ, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” And then do things the way Jesus Christ would do them – is doing them – if His Spirit has taken up residence in us. That’s the fundamental difference which can be seen – that’s the test – of which Jesus we’re following. The Son of God, or the Patriotic Politician. If you’re following the Son of God, He makes things uncomfortable for you. If it’s the patriotic political Jesus, then He’s telling you what you want to hear. See the difference, Church? Don’t be hood-winked by Jesus wrapped in the flag – He’s so much more than that!

The last part of the reading are things which haven't happened yet. But they still contain a great promise! God says, "I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," (verses 19-21). We'll see all sorts of things happening before Jesus comes back. He is coming back, friends, I hope you know it and believe it! As long as we stay focused on Him and do things His way – that's what "calling on His name" means, He'll save us. He'll bring us to where He is. Trust Him. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is going to take great care of us!

Prayer: Living God, You have created all that is. Send forth Your Spirit to renew and restore us, that we may proclaim Your good news in ways and words that all will understand and believe. Amen.