

PENTECOST SUNDAY
THE CONNECTING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

(06/05/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 11:1-9
 Acts 2:1-21
 John 14:15-17

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. . . You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.” (John 14:15-17)

Today is the seventh Sunday after Easter (the eighth Sunday of the Easter season). It is also Pentecost Sunday, the celebration of the transforming and inspiring experience of the Holy Spirit by the disciples that occurred fifty days after Easter. It marks the end of the liturgical season of Easter.

The term "Pentecost" has several connotations. Some Christians celebrate it as the birthday of the church, marked by the changing of the liturgical color from white to red, the color of special ecclesiastical celebrations, e.g., Reformation Day, ordinations, and installations. Others picture charismatic, Pentecostal worship services in the tradition of the Holy Rollers, the Holy Jumpers, or the Holy Screammers. Still others associate it with the phenomenon of glossolalia, where people who have received the gift of tongues speak a strange and ancient language, a language that can be understood only by those who have received the gift of interpretation of tongues.

I have never spoken in tongues, nor have I ever witnessed the phenomenon of glossolalia, having spent all my religious life within the mainline Protestant church. I have no doubt, however, that this phenomenon does exist and that it is meaningful. A friend of mine told me some time ago that she has experienced it, and that she would describe it as a special kind of prayer, a deep kind of prayer. In the last analysis, however, I agree with the apostle Paul when he says that it is better to speak a few words that instruct or enlighten listeners than it is to speak many words in an ancient or sacred language that only a select few can understand.

The theme of communication, of connection, of overcoming barriers between people was a vital part of that first Pentecostal experience. Pentecost, by the way, is not a uniquely Christian holiday. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Hebrew Feast of Weeks. The festival of Pentecost, also known as the Festival of Harvest or the Day of First Fruits, took place at the end of the Hebrew reaping season. For the Hebrews, the reaping season was forty-nine days, a "week of weeks." It ended with the one-day celebration of the Festival of Weeks at the central sanctuary. Everyone was expected to be there.

The small band of Jesus' followers, who are apparently still Jewish in their religious observances, are present and gathered at this celebration. Suddenly they became aware of the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ. They hear a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and tongues of fire settle upon their heads. This helps us understand why two of the symbols of the Holy Spirit are wind and fire. The disciples had never experienced anything like this before! They suddenly, unexpectedly find themselves speaking to people of different lands, different dialects, different traditions, and somehow, miraculously, the people to whom they speak understand what they are saying!

This was not the first time the disciples had experienced the presence of the risen Christ. The risen Christ came to them in the human form of Jesus by the tomb, in the Upper Room, by the side of the lake, and on the road to Emmaus immediately following the Resurrection. These encounters convinced the disciples that Jesus still lived, that death could not separate them from their Lord. These encounters encouraged them, empowered them, and kept them from disbanding. But between those experiences and the Day of Pentecost, it is recorded in scripture that they did absolutely nothing. So, these initial post-resurrection encounters could not be the end of the story.

It seems to me that the post-resurrection appearances of the risen Christ were still basically an experience of Jesus. In these encounters, the disciples see Jesus, talk with him, and eat with him. Through these experiences, they realize that Jesus has risen, that he is Lord of all, and that they, as his apostles, have a mission. But Jesus is still experienced as separate, still not a part of them. Note that at the end of each of the encounters, he leaves them, departs from them, vanishes from their midst.

The Pentecostal experience of the risen Christ is different, for it is a personal inner experience. No one, not even the disciples, sees the outward bodily form of Jesus. They see tongues of flame. The disciples experience the risen Christ not in the somewhat altered form of Jesus of Nazareth, but as an inner presence. This empowers them to preach and heal. The Book of Acts tells us that, immediately following this experience, Peter and John heal a man lame from birth. I believe that this is the first recorded healing by a disciple. At Pentecost, the disciples experience the indwelling presence and power of the risen Christ, just as Saul later experiences it on the road to Damascus.

The crowd, unable to understand what is happening, accuses the disciples of being drunk. Peter responds by pointing out that they did, in fact, communicate, and that they communicate effectively. Drunks do not communicate well; they have an especially difficult time listening and understanding the point of view of others. In this Pentecostal experience, new and creative bonds

are established between the disciples and people of foreign lands. They experience the connecting power of understanding.

Pentecost teaches us that the Spirit of God does not divide--it unites! It unites through empathy and love, which are the deepest forms of communication.

Scripture lists several gifts that accompany the experience or presence of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost provides us with a way to judge the gifts of the Spirit. A person under the influence of the Holy Spirit would not *preach at* someone, but rather would *communicate with* that person. Communication involves attentive and respectful listening. The miracle of Pentecost is as much in the hearing as in the speaking. It was not the sound that came out of the disciples' mouths that was the miracle; it was the bonds of communication and understanding that were established, bonds that overcame what seemed to be impassible barriers.

God knows we need the experience of that first Pentecost today as we have never needed it before! Nations are alienated from nations because of differing political, social, and economic systems, making it difficult for us to work toward common goals in the betterment of our earth, its people, and its animals. Segments of our own population are alienated by class-consciousness, gender-consciousness, racial prejudice, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, and antisemitism. Following George Floyd's murder, thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement, whites are finally beginning to listen to Blacks, are beginning to realize the many forms of prejudice and discrimination Blacks experience, including the systemic racism that has been encoded in our laws, our customs, and our institutions. Whites are beginning to understand and be sensitive to the micro- and macro-aggressions that members of minority groups experience on a regular basis.

God knows we need the experience of that first Pentecost today as we have never needed it before! Many marriages suffer from the breakdown in communication that is arises from a breakdown in understanding, a breakdown in empathy, a breakdown in the ability to accept and validate the experience of someone who is different from us. I recommend Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages*, to many couples, for it can help us to understand, express, and receive love within our family. So often, especially with our teenagers, it feels like we are speaking a different language.

The obstacles to genuine community seem overwhelming! The dark forces in the world and within us, the demonic powers that seek to divide us seem more powerful than the forces, the energies that are working to unite us. And this is what demonic powers do—they split us off from our true center, from our brothers and sisters, and from that God who is the source of all life. When we are possessed by these dark forces, we become capable of doing terrible things,

evil things, and we feel justified in what we are doing. Too much evil has been done and continues to be done in the name of religion.

We need to experience the unifying, connecting energy of the Holy Spirit that dwells not only within Christians but within all people to help us transcend our differences and weave a beautiful fabric out of the diverse strands in our society and our world. If our church is truly inspired by the Holy Spirit, it will bring a healing word and it will also serve as an example to our society. I think our church does this.

Let me just share with you one possible way that we as individuals might work to overcome the polarization that plagues our society, and which threatens to rend the fragile tapestry of democracy asunder. Arnold Kling mentions it in his book, *The Three Languages of Politics: Talking Across the Political Divides*. This book speaks a healing, reconciling word to our nation and our time.

Let me first briefly identify the three languages, the three axes which frame the basis of our three most common political views. Kling maintains that progressives, conservatives, and libertarians are like tribes speaking different languages. The language that resonates with one tribe makes no sense to the others. As a result, political discussions seldom promote understanding; they more often tend to increase polarization and demonization. With regard to social issues, Kling says:

- A progressive will communicate along the oppressor-oppressed axis;
- A conservative will communicate along the civilization-barbarism axis; and
- A libertarian will communicate along the liberty-coercion axis.

Kling tells us that the economist Bryan Caplan coined the term “ideological Turing test” to denote a thought experiment. In this experiment, you are placed in a room with a group of people holding a different ideology than you. Your task is to pretend to share their ideology. If they are convinced that you are one of them, you have passed the test.

For example, as all of you know, I am a progressive. I view social issues along an oppressor-oppressed axis. I see European colonists as the oppressors and the native people of the European “colonies” the oppressed. I see White supremacists as the oppressors and Blacks as the oppressed. I see wealthy industrialists as the oppressors and their workers as the oppressed. By the way, on May 30, 1937, ten people were killed when police fired on steelworkers who were peacefully demonstrating near the Republic Steel plant in Chicago. I see this as an example of the oppression of workers by wealthy industrialists through the police that act as the enforcement arm of upper-class whites. Conservatives would see the demonstrating workers as threatening to

undermine the free-market capitalism upon which our country was founded. Libertarians would maintain that governmental actions like laws that dictate minimum wage and worker safety take away people's freedom.

I understand that conservatives feel that extending equal rights to women, Blacks, Latinos, LGBTQ and other minority groups undermines our beloved civilization. As a progressive, I would counter that our civilization is especially beloved by those in the highest racial and socioeconomic caste, not so much by those who are the objects of prejudice and discrimination, those who struggle to earn a living. Conservatives would say that the fall of the Roman empire came through the infusion of barbarians from the north. I view the Romans as the oppressors and those who lived in conquered countries the oppressed. I understand the fear of insecure whites that they are being systematically replaced by people of color in this country; I just don't believe this is what is happening, and my Christian faith leads me to hold a vision of a diverse society, a society that embraces and empowers difference, individuality, a multicultural nation, and a multicultural world.

If I participated in a Turing experiment, I would have to be able to articulate the conservative point of view so well, so eloquently, that a group of conservatives would not discover that I am a progressive. To do this, I would have to understand the political and social views that the conservative holds and why he/she holds them. This would be a real challenge! I suppose we could do this with other religions as well. If we were able to talk about Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and even atheism so knowledgeably and eloquently that people of that faith would not know that we are essentially Christians, we would be less likely to distort and demonize the other person's views. And this would lead to greater, to deeper understanding.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, people of one tongue come together, but pride disperses them. Their grandiose plans break down. In a confusion of languages, they are scattered. I think that in place of the word "pride," we could insert white supremacy, white nationalism, a caste system that justified the colonization of most of the world, the subjugation of racial groups we deem inferior, the genocide that is still going on in many parts of the world today.

Pentecost is the gospel's answer to the Tower of Babel. At Babel, the spirit of pride divides God's children. At Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ unites them. The Tower of Babel teaches us that pride separates and alienates. Pentecost proclaims that the Holy Spirit unites, heals, and restores. Across the gaps and chasms of time, Pentecost calls to each of us, "Let the Spirit help you share with one another, listen to one another, communicate with one another, and understand."

An anonymous author once wrote a line of poetry that pertains to the healing power of eternal life:

*A rest for broken things
too broke to mend.*

There is a healing that takes place after death, but the Spirit of God brings healing, brings rest and mending in this life as well. The Spirit of God leads us to new creation! Wherever love is present, the Holy Spirit is at work. Wherever the removal of a barrier helps people to find themselves and each other, the Holy Spirit is present. Wherever new life arises out of the ashes of death, and healing bridges the chasm of alienation and brokenness, the Holy Spirit is present. When we reach out to each other in answer to the invitation of Christ and create new ways of living with each other, the Holy Spirit creates a Pentecost once again!

This is what the church is all about--a search for connection and communion. We need to understand what happened at that first Pentecost thousands of years ago, but we also need to be open to our own experience of Pentecost today. We need to experience the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us. We need to embrace diversity within our church, our nation, and the world.

We celebrate Pentecost not only to revive the memory of the risen Christ, but also to empower it, to strengthen our hope and our resolve to experience wholeness within ourselves and within the world. This is the true meaning of community, the true meaning of communion. And this sense of true, accepting, loving community is what our nation and our world so desperately need!

If we are to experience Pentecost, we need to be open to the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and within all people, that Holy Spirit who alone can make that hope, that dream, that vision a reality. Let that Spirit be with us as we experience the presence of our risen Lord and as we share with each other the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

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