

THE CONNECTING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT Pentecost Sunday

(05/28/2023)

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 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 Easter season. This is why the color of the paraments on the lectern, the pulpit, and the color of my stole have changed from white to red. Red is the color of special ecclesiastical celebrations, e.g., Reformation Day, ordinations, installations, and, of course, Pentecost, the birthday of the church.

Pentecost means different things to different persons. Some Christians picture charismatic 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. Both of these gifts, according to the apostle Paul, are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I have never spoken in tongues, nor have I ever witnessed the phenomenon of glossolalia. I have no doubt, however, that this phenomenon does exist and that it is meaningful. A friend of mine who has experienced it said 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 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.

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 that 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 these experiences and the Day of Pentecost, they did absolutely nothing. So, these initial post-resurrection encounters, even the experience of Jesus' ascension into heaven, could not be the end of the story.

The post-resurrection encounters with 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, or, in his ascension, goes up in the air.

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 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 record of a healing performed by an apostle. At Pentecost, the disciples experience the indwelling presence and power of the risen Christ, just as Saul later experiences it in his powerful transformative experience 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 are, in fact, communicating, and that they are communicating effectively. As you know, drunks do not communicate well; they have an especially difficult time listening to and understanding others' points of view. In this Pentecostal experience, creative bonds are established between the disciples and people of foreign lands. They experience the connecting power of not only listening, but also 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 and most transformative 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.

We need the experience of that first Pentecost 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, antisemitism, and various forms of castes. Thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement, whites are beginning to realize the many forms of prejudice and discrimination Blacks experience, including the systemic racism that is encoded in our laws, our customs, and our institutions.

We need the experience of that first Pentecost as we have never needed it before! Many marriages suffer from a breakdown in communication that stems from a diminished understanding, a diminished empathy, a diminished ability to accept and validate the experience of someone who is different from us. Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages*, gives us tools that can help us to understand, express, and receive love within our family.

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

To cite a recent example, a few months ago, in Bloomington, Indiana, a 56-year-old woman riding a public bus stabbed an 18-year-old Asian American woman, an undergraduate student whom she did not know, eleven times in the face and neck. The assailant later told police that she hoped that the young woman of Chinese descent died because “then there will be one less of them to blow up our country.” This, of course, is being prosecuted as a hate crime. I have

no idea where the attacker got the idea that Chinese Americans are trying to blow up our country. Actually, I do; it is called the internet. And I could make a shrewd guess about the source of her information, the source of her fear, though he has recently been fired by his network, so it may not be him.

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—and this is what makes us special!

Let me mention one possible way that we as individuals might work to overcome the polarization that plagues our society, that threatens to rend the fragile tapestry of democracy. 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.

Kling notes 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 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.

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 liberal. I am a progressive. This means that, for whatever reasons, I view social issues along an oppressor-oppressed axis. For example, I see European colonists as the oppressors and the native people of the European “colonies” as the oppressed. I see White supremacists as the oppressors and Blacks as the oppressed. I see wealthy capitalists, wealthy industrialists as the oppressors and their workers as the oppressed.

For example, eighty-six years ago this weekend, on May 30, 1937, ten people were killed when police fired on steelworkers who were peacefully demonstrating near the Republic Steel plant in Chicago. Because I am a progressive, I see this as an example of the oppression of

workers by wealthy industrialists through the police that function as the enforcement arm of upper-class whites.

Conservatives would view the demonstration differently. Conservatives would see the demonstrating workers as threatening to undermine the free-market capitalism upon which our country was founded. They would see their demonstrations, their strikes as examples of a barbarism that threatens our civilization, our civilization as we know it.

Libertarians would maintain that governmental actions like laws that dictate minimum wage and worker safety take away our freedom. They maintain that child labor laws and laws that prohibit slavery of blacks and vulnerable immigrants are acts of coercion; they restrict the liberty that has made our country great. They articulate a point of view to which I, as a progressive, would predicably respond, “Yes, we have a great country. But great for whom?”

Conservatives believe 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 castes, not so much by those who are the objects of prejudice and discrimination, or 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, so I am not particularly upset at the dissolution of the Roman Empire. I understand the fear of insecure whites that they are being systematically replaced by Jews, Muslims, and 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 the ideological Turing experiment that Kling suggests, I would have to be able to articulate the conservative point of view so well, so eloquently, that a group of conservatives or libertarians would not discover that I am a progressive in disguise. To do this, I would have to understand the political and social views that they hold and why they hold them. This would be a real challenge for me!

By the way, I believe 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 knowledgably and eloquently that a person of that faith would not know that we are essentially Christians, we would be less likely to distort and demonize the other person's religious views and practices. 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 tribal genocides that are 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.*

I believe there is a healing that takes place after death, but I know that 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 have 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 Christ’s presence in our lives, to let this presence 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 not only celebrate Pentecost, but actually 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.

*A sermon shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.