

Elizabeth Presbyterian Church
Dr. Bruce A. Spear
May 23, 2010

“The Gift of the Holy Spirit”

Prayer of Confession

Holy and mighty God, your Son’s triumph over sin and death has opened to us the gate of eternal life. We acknowledge our sin, our weakness, and our mortality. Without Jesus we perish; with him we live even though we die. Purify our hearts that we may follow him and share in the radiance of his eternal glory. Open our hearts and minds to receive the Holy Spirit which he has sent that we may be filled with His truth, His comfort, and His power all the days of our lives. We ask this in the name of our risen Lord. Amen.

Acts 2:1-21

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

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

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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

Today is Pentecost. Pentecost was the second of the three main Jewish festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The word Pentecost means 50 days, because Pentecost came 50 days after the Passover. It was also called the Feast of Weeks because it was held on the day after a period of seven weeks of seven days following Passover.

Pentecost in the Christian church is remembered because it was during this Jewish festival when people had gathered from many distant places, that God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus had promised to his disciples. He had asked them to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from God to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Our passage today picks up the story of Acts with the disciples gathered together in one place waiting for what Jesus had promised. Suddenly, there was something like a violent rushing wind that filled the entire place where there were sitting. Something that looked like tongues of fire came and rested upon each disciple there. We don’t know how many of them were there, maybe the twelve, but probably more disciples than that, probably a gathering of young and old, male and female, slave and free.

Each person who was there was filled with the Holy Spirit and given the ability to speak other languages. As they were speaking other languages, the people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks began to realize that these disciples were speaking to each of them in their native tongue. These foreign followers of the Jewish religion had gathered from places as far away as modern day Italy and Libya to the west and Arabia and modern day Iran to the east. They all heard at least one of the disciples speaking to them in their own

indigenous language.

Jesus had told his disciples to take the gospel of God's love to all nations teaching them to do all that he had commanded them. But he had told them to wait in Jerusalem until he filled them with the power to fulfill that Great Commission. Now they were given the ability to speak to foreigners in their own language. Instantly people from every nation under heaven were hearing the good news of God's love in the person of Jesus Christ in their own language.

By all accounts, this ability that God gave them was exactly what it says, the ability to speak other languages. It should not be confused with the gift of tongues which is a heavenly prayer language for the nurture of the believer or a prophetic language which needs an interpreter for people to understand.

I have met many people who have been blessed with a heavenly prayer language, but I have only met one person who was given the ability to speak another language without ever studying it or even hearing much of it prior to that point. His name is Setan Lee. He lives in Aurora when he is not working in his native land of Cambodia. He was a young student in the late 1970's when the Khmer Rouge came to power and put him in a labor camp. Eventually he was able to escape and ended up in a refugee camp in Thailand. The refugees from Cambodia were unable to communicate with the camp officials because none of them spoke English, so one night they gathered in prayer and laid their hands on Setan Lee asking God to give him the gift of other languages, specifically the gift of speaking English so he could communicate on their behalf with the camp officials. As Setan tells it, the next day he woke up and went to the headquarters and began speaking to them in English. Since then he has never systematically studied the English language, but he knows the language well enough to take ordination examinations and be ordained a Presbyterian minister. Sometime I would like him to be able to fill our pulpit here in Elizabeth.

That is what God did for this group of Galilean disciples whom Jesus had asked to take the gospel to all the nations of the world. He gave them the ability to speak in other languages.

The people around them were mostly amazed and perplexed but some were skeptical and sneered, "They are filled with new wine." It is interesting that the first weapon against the gospel then and now is sarcasm and mockery. Later the opponents of the gospel would arrest the disciples, execute some and imprison others, but the Evil One starts out by making fun of those who are telling others about Jesus.

This is still true today. In some parts of the world, believers are persecuted and imprisoned for their attempts to share their faith in Jesus Christ; in other places believers are simply mocked and made a laughing stock, and that is enough to shut them up. In Japan where I grew up, there is very little outright persecution, but people generally laugh at someone who believes in miracles and mythological stories like a man who was God in the flesh. In our own country, it is much the same way. If we are very vocal about our faith, we are called Preacher Man, Bible Thumper or a religious fanatic. Now there are some Christians that probably deserve those epithets because they share a canned presentation that sounds more like a commercial for laundry detergent. But for most of us, even if we have an authentic word of faith to share, we find ourselves fearful of ridicule and so we keep our mouths shut. As Gradye Parsons, the Executive of the PCUSA, says that Presbyterians are the Marcel Marceaux evangelists of the Christian world. They do act out the love of God by helping people and rescuing people from poverty, homelessness and hunger, but they never open their mouths to tell those they help that God loves them and has sent Jesus Christ as the way of salvation.

The transformation from a fearful disciple to a bold preacher of the gospel was nowhere more dramatic than in the life of the disciple Peter. The person who got up to defend the disciples against those who ridiculed them was none other than Peter. As William Willimon writes:

It was Peter who only "followed at a distance," Peter whom the maid drove to utter the terrible words, "Woman, I do not know him." We left him weeping in the courtyard, a disciple tested and found wanting. Yet here, before the half inquiring, half mocking crowd, Peter is the first, the very first to lift up his voice and proclaim openly the word that only a few weeks before he could not speak, even to a serving woman at midnight. In Genesis, the Spirit of God breathed life into dust and created a human being. In Acts, the Spirit of God breathes life into a once cowardly disciple and creates a new man who now has the gift of bold speech.

Peter takes the mockers head on. He refutes their accusation that he and the other disciples were inebriated. He points them instead to their own Hebrew Scriptures, to the book of Joel, where Joel spoke of a time when God would pour out his spirit on all flesh, on all kinds of people. God would give all kinds of people the understanding and boldness to speak God's words of hope and love to those around them. He talks about sons and daughters being filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaiming God's Word. He talks about young men seeing visions for the future and old men dreaming dreams of what God is able to do in the world. He also includes

slaves who were viewed as farm property or household property. No one ever listened to a slave, but God would give them his Spirit, and they would speak the word of the Lord boldly. Not just men servants but women servants as well. There was nothing lower in the society of that time than women and children who were slaves. But out of their mouths, God will proclaim the gospel which in a nutshell was the offer that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

That is the point of Pentecost for us today, the truth that God has equipped each of us to tell other people about Jesus. Gradye Parsons tells about when he was a freshman at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, just out of high school like our graduates today. He was called home because of a death in the family, and so he was on an airplane sitting next to a gentleman in a business suit. The man said, "I've got some work to do, then we'll talk." When his work was done, the gentleman noticed that Gradye was wearing a brand new, orange University of Tennessee t-shirt. Gradye told him he was a freshman at the University. The gentleman then told him that was an interesting coincidence, because he happened to be the president of the University of Tennessee. They went on to talk about why he was flying home and how death comes so unexpectedly. Then the university president asked Gradye if he had a faith that would carry him through life and beyond the grave. Gradye was a believer, but he tells today how much that short conversation with the president of his school confirmed his faith and made it a priority in his college years.

God promises that each of us can engage others in conversations about our faith if we will depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit. As you can see on your handout, John Stott reminds us:

Just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus when John baptized him, so that he entered his public ministry 'full of the Holy Spirit,' 'led by the Spirit,' 'in the power of the Spirit' and 'anointed' by the Spirit, so now the same Spirit comes upon the disciples of Jesus to equip them for their mission to the world.

In the gospel of John, Jesus promises three ways that the Holy Spirit will be with us. He will give us his divine presence. That is the inner experience of God and the assurance that God is real and that he will never leave us or forsake us. He will also give us his divine power. When we find ourselves intimidated by situations, we can rely on God's power to oppose the Evil One and give us courage to speak God's words boldly. And finally, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give us his divine truth. Jesus said we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. I remember hearing about a college student who was studying the Bible for the first time having been raised in church but never really having studied the Christian faith. He said, "I knew it was true, I just didn't know it was that true."

And so we come back to the story of Pentecost. One commentator I read this week talked about Pentecost as almost an out of body experience, something totally sensory without any cognitive reality. Another talked about the chaos of Pentecost with the cacophony of languages. If you asked Peter or the other disciples, I think they would say it was actually a very cognitive experience. They all remembered that Jesus had said they would be filled with power if they waited for the Holy Spirit, and they found every word of it to be true. That gave them a confidence and a boldness to go out and tell the world about Jesus. If it had been a mind blowing extra-sensory experience, it would have fizzled a week later. But it was based on the promises of Jesus and on the promises of God in the book of Joel, to make ordinary people like you and me, young and old, male and female, wealthy and not so wealthy, educated and not so educated, cool and nerdy, all of us his witnesses until Jesus returns again and makes all things new.

Affirmation of Faith – by Raymond Lindquist

The Holy Spirit is the witness of God's Presence and Power for good. He is the rush of Heaven's wind, the fire of Divine communication, and He does not rest until He has revealed Christ as the Son of God, redeemer of believing men and women and inseparable companion of the committed soul. The Holy Spirit never fails. He is imperturbable in tribulation, indomitable in spiritual action and invincible in evangelism.

We want to be as full of the Holy Spirit as the sea is full of water, as the sky is full of air, as the air is full of oxygen, as the continent is full of land, and as the fire is full of flame. We want him to animate our spirits for the doing of God's will, to calm our souls, and to bring us comfort by recalling to our minds the great promises of our living God. Amen.