

Sermon 053115 Pentecost
Scripture Acts 2: 1-12
Sermon Title The Gift of Understanding

The Bible is full of action stories. There are murders, floods, wars, plagues, parting seas, lion dens, and miracles to mention a partial list. Today's story from the book of Acts is as action packed and image filled as any part of Scripture.

Firstly, you have the chaotic sense of the street crowd with all those people from all those exotic places: Parthians, and Medes, and Elemites, and on; we just heard the list. What a mixed multitude. I don't know if you've ever done this, but this passage makes me think of Harvard Square on a warm Saturday afternoon. There are people from all over the world wearing their native clothing, speaking their own languages. It's some of the best people watching in the world. That's where I go when reading of the Jerusalem crowds in Acts. Jerusalem was full of Jews who had come to Jerusalem from far and wide for the Pentecost festival fifty days after Passover.

Then there is another image. It is fantastic and exotic. It is the wind indoors, the fire, the power, the Spirit. Let's hear the passage again, now from a different translation (NIV), "When the day of the Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound came like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues.” (Acts 2: 1-4) It is a scene that is bound to attract attention and there is no other like it in Scripture: a room invaded by the phenomenon of the divine, a secret place made holy and transformed.

Then there is the third image, which may be the most jarring of all. It is where we get the notion of the very term, “Pentecostal.” It is, of course, the ecstatic conversation in tongues. It is the inspired ability to speak so to be understood in all different languages. This ability to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to diverse people was immediately seen as the mighty work of God.

The gift of Pentecost overcame the curse of Babel. At Babel, you will recall, there appeared the confusion of tongues as a result of earthly ambition and pride. Those prideful people tried to build a tower unto heaven in the plain of Shinar. Still today, diversity of languages frustrates our ability to be understood and to understand. Even among those who speak the same language, pride gets in the way of listening to others. Pride calls us to listen to our own voice and beliefs above others.

At Pentecost, pride and diversity were overcome by a divine power, a divine power that transcended diverse tongues. It gave diverse people the power to understand, to hear in one’s own

accent, regional dialect, the messages of the wonderful works of God.

The gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity of the great crowd. They did not cease to be Medes, Persians, and Elemites. They were not reduced to a general bland sameness. No, they did not become less than they were, they became more than they had been. For they became one with all those who heard and understood that God was alive and active in this world, and wanted all of them to participate in God's purposes.

Of course, diversity still exists and so does pride. This is true in Christianity. The history of Christ's church is that it has splintered repeatedly so we don't even know how many Christian denominations there are at any given moment. This is both fortunate and unfortunate. It is fortunate in that the diversity enables people to worship in churches in which they are comfortable, where they might respond to the music or the message in a way that makes them both comfortable and challenged. There are many, many options in finding the right church home, which is a good thing.

Diversity within the church is unfortunate in that there is pride in the churches. Denominations think they are the one's getting it right and other churches are getting it wrong.

We should remember, you and I, that we are members of a fellowship that exceeds our capacity to define it. The gospel is not “our “ gospel that we get to define. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ that all of us are privileged to hear, and the unity of what we hear overcomes the diversity of who we are.

Since the sixteenth century, we Protestants have boasted of what we are not and whom we do not belong. A religion of protest is essentially, a negative, denying religion. Having cut ourselves off from anything beyond our own circle, we have been tempted to make our circle the object of our worship. This is a dangerous, heretical and even sinful impulse to raise yourself and your style of worship above others. That is not to say that that same behavior does not exist in other circles. We know it does.

But we, today and in this place, are a minority church in an area that is dominated by another denomination. We, among all, should keep pride in check and accept the universal offered at Pentecost. We are in unity with all Christ believers and that unity comes from God and God’s most perfect will that we are one in Christ our Lord. This is the spirit that gave birth to the church and sustains it.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended, and with a mighty wind and cloven tongues of fire for a moment overcame human differences and united that diverse and spirited company by the gift

of understanding. They heard the good news, as they were, where they were, and they were never the same again. Pentecost is many things-fire, wind, ecstasy, and renewal-but more than all that it is the Spirit whose gift is that of understanding, of knowing who and whose we are. We celebrate today that gift to them and to us and we pray that what transformed them may transform us, and with us the world for God and Christ. AMEN