### “What Does This Mean?” Steve Finlan for The First Church, May 19, 2024

**Acts 2:1–18**

1When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11Cretans and Arabs . . .”

12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

14 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. 15Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17‘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. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.’”

The church was born when the Spirit of Truth was poured out on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish harvest festival occurring fifty days after Passover. We today have the same spirit that they received on that day. We can be drawn to truth by that Spirit. As Jesus said, “the Spirit of Truth will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). Why, then, don’t we have the same numerous miraculous events, or feel the same freshness and power? Miracles seem to go along with a new spiritual endowment, so it was the appropriate time for miracles. Another reason might be that when something is new, it has a vividness and power that it doesn’t have when it’s become familiar, and is taken for granted.

The audience for Peter’s Pentecost sermon was multi-national. Pentecost was one of the three pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish calendar. Thousands of Jews, along with Gentiles who were converting to Judaism, traveled to Jerusalem every year for Passover, and many of them stayed fifty more days to celebrate Pentecost there as well. It was no accident that Jerusalem was packed with religious pilgrims on the day chosen for the Spirit to come. It shows that God reaches out to *everyone*, Parthians, Medes, Mesopotamians and Arabs. In fact, there are millions of Arab Christians today.

Peter and the other apostles were filled with courage when the Spirit was poured out on them. They had been cowering, in hiding, but the Spirit empowered them to go out and preach. For this reason, I think the Spirit can be called the Spirit of Courage, as well as the Spirit of Truth, the Comforter, and the Advocate.

Peter uses an Old Testament text to speak of the Spirit being poured out upon all age groups and social classes, upon male and female, young and old, slave and free (Acts 2:17–18). There were no class or gender distinctions, for we are speaking of a *spiritual* influence, not a political one. We are told that everyone was “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32).

The Spirit of Truth is an influence that works for peace and harmony as well as truth. This Spirit is for everyone, of all nations and ages, who has a taste for truth, or is seeking truth. The Spirit heightens our awareness of being members of the family of God, for all are equal in the eyes of God.

In a lot of ways, it is really a Jesus spirit. Jesus said “the Spirit of Truth . . . will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13–14). The Spirit reflects Jesus’ own generosity, compassion, and openness. Jesus was friendly with Syrians, Romans, and Greeks. He ministered in the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15:21; Mark 7:24, 31). His openness to other cultures and peoples is also reflected in the Spirit he sent. All the major religions have a kernel of truth, and Jesus would support all honest seekers of God.

Is it really possible that the Spirit that speaks of Jesus and reveals what is distinctly *his* would also speak for tolerance of a diversity of religious thinking, as well as a diversity of races? Yes, I think so. Respect for honest religious motivation is characteristic of Jesus. I think the Spirit of Truth can encourage spiritual unity of purpose across religious boundaries. Jesus always honors every honest religious motivation. Of a Roman, he said “not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9). To a Canaanite woman he said, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (Matt 15:28). He was not affirming Roman or Canaanite beliefs or rituals, but the heartfelt faith of *those* individuals. Why could the Spirit not do the same thing today, uplifting honest faith wherever it may occur?

It is helpful for us to learn something about how people of other religions live their faith. It helps us to understand our own religious tradition. It is helpful to notice how people recognize a moral law, how they think of the divine presence, and how they speak of higher values.

Whenever we cooperate with the truth and beauty of God’s way, we are working for the kingdom of God. Can we find ways to speak the truth without condemning others’ beliefs? Can we be Christian leaders and also peacemakers with those of other faiths? Can we be effective evangelists and yet gracious disciples? Jesus did say “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also . . . So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). The biblical promise says “I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh” (Acts 2:17). He will gather sheep from unexpected places.

So how does this affect us? I think the Spirit changes us, but only if we let it. It increases our feeling of closeness to Jesus, and it brings Jesus into our relationships with others. This includes tolerance and understanding of people from different cultures. Our love will take on a Jesus-flavor, a Jesus-like ability to affirm the faith of a Roman or a Canaanite. And it helps us realize that this is part of our bond with Jesus and with God. In Isaiah, it says “I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (Isa 56:8), and again: “I amcoming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory” (66:18). Jesus will gather together in unity the scattered children of God. Ephesians says God’s will is “set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:9–10).

The bestowal of the Spirit of Truth on Pentecost is part of that plan of God’s, to gradually spiritualize the human race. It will take a long time for it to really take effect, but there will come a day when, as the prophet Habakkuk said, “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14). This is the goal and purpose of the spirit poured out on Pentecost. It is an extraordinary promise. It is the greatest hope, not linked to any hierarchy, culture, or ritual.

Go forth, encouraged and energized by this knowledge and this hope. Think of the Spirit offering guidance to you every day. Let the Spirit move you, uplift you, inspire you, make you open to new experiences. Pray that you may be deeply receptive to this divine influence. Happy birthday, church!