

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PENTECOST SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
WHAT HAPPENED AT PENTECOST?
Acts 2:1-11
May 23, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

The phenomena associated with Pentecost are mysterious and strange to us - - a sound like a mighty wind, flames dispersed on each disciple, and other tongues being spoken. The point is, all present were filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave utterance to the gospel in every language.

Communication problems are as old as human history and as new as the present moment. Language, which aims at understanding, sometimes complicates and frustrates our efforts to communicate. The language of the Spirit, in contrast to the confusion of Babel, is the language of understanding, reconciliation, and love.

People in general have more in common with each other than differences. Christians, Jews, and Muslims are siblings in the same religious family, each acknowledging the same God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer of the universe. Still we all continue to build walls between us.

The powerful presence of the resurrected Christ was mediated through his words. His teachings took on new meanings after his death. The resurrection spoke profoundly of his sacrifice and his victory. Then his presence was experienced in another new way in the language of Pentecost.

On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus. It is one of the most important events recorded in the New Testament. Historically, however, it has been controversial and often misunderstood. The various phenomena raise questions about what really happened and about what it all means. Does Pentecost, as recorded in Acts, vindicate and justify all modern expressions of pentecostalism? Is *glossalalia*, or “**speaking in tongues**,” a genuine manifestation of the Holy Spirit? What really happened at Pentecost?

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem as he had instructed, to wait for "*the promise of the Father.*" The "*upper room*" was where they stayed in Jerusalem, and where they had eaten the Passover meal with Jesus. Now they waited together and prayed, as he had told them to do.

Pentecost is the second of three great Jewish festivals. It comes fifty days after Passover. It fell in a season when traveling was easier, so there were usually more people in Jerusalem than at Passover. The event we celebrate today occurred on the Jewish day of Pentecost, early in the morning. There were three manifestations of the Spirit's presence. **First**, there was a noise like that of a strong driving wind. Acts does not say there was a wind, but a noise like a wind. **Second**, there appeared tongues like flames of fire, resting on each one present - - not necessarily literal flames of fire, but tongues like flames. **Third**, there was speaking in other tongues - - not "*unknown*" tongues, but "*other*" tongues, meaning other languages. This event was so important that it was accompanied by visible and audible manifestations.

Pentecost, like Easter, was a unique event. It had not happened before and would not happen again. Pentecost was not a normative event. Acts begins with a bursting kaleidoscope of colorful and dramatic signs of the Holy Spirit. As we move through Acts, however, such demonstrations of the Spirit's presence are like a declining angle. There are no more sounds of rushing wind, no more fiery tongues, and only two other times does anyone speak in tongues. The Holy Spirit becomes less a source of ecstatic experience and more a problem-solver in the life of the church.

St. Paul says in Galatians that the "*fruit*" of the Spirit are "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*" There is no mention of ecstasy or speaking in tongues as evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence. In 1 Corinthians 12-13, Paul makes it clear that the greatest gift of the Spirit is love. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know that their speaking in tongues, even if it was a sign of the Spirit, was of little value compared to the Spirit's other gifts.

What happened at Corinth was different from what happened at Pentecost. At Pentecost the disciples did not speak in "*unknown*" tongues, but in "*other*" tongues. It was ecstatic speech, but it was not gibberish. Those present from all over the known world understood in their own native languages. This speaking in tongues was characterized by understanding. No interpreter was necessary. In Corinth, where they were trying to duplicate what happened at Pentecost, an

interpreter was needed, and this speaking in tongues was not characterized by understanding.

F. F. Bruce says that when God generates something new in the world, the old containers are incapable of holding it. Like the Jordan River when the spring floods come, it simply cannot carry the water. But after the world accommodates the presence of the new, when we understand it and appreciate its full meaning, then the river moves back within its banks. Order is restored, and what was once sensational becomes the norm under which people live.

Genesis 11 begins with these words, ***“Now the whole earth had one language and few words.”*** The familiar story of the tower of Babel follows. As people migrated from the east and re-settled, they said, ***“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens.”*** This did not please God, who said, ***“Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”*** The result was that the peoples were scattered throughout the earth, each with their own language. The place where the tower would have been built was thereafter called ***“Babel,”*** which means confusion, as in ***“babble,”*** because there God thwarted the people’s audacious plan to reach the heavens.

Pentecost is Babel revisited. Where people refuse to honor God, and acknowledge their kinship as children of God, communication gives way to confusion. Imagine the chaos of people speaking different languages without an interpreter present! Babel is a parable of our failure to communicate with one another and our unwillingness to learn one another’s language. It is the story of human alienation and the resulting estrangement, which are so evident in the world today.

The native tongue of the Holy Spirit is love. The language of Pentecost is the language of Christ-like love. To bring it closer to home, there are married couples who tragically become so alienated that they can no longer hear each other. A third party may be able to understand each of them, but the couple cannot communicate. On the other hand, there are couples who are so close and so open to each other that at times speaking is not even necessary. They have a language of their own. When we are open to God’s Spirit and to one another, we discover the simplest language in the world.

The world is fractured and its peoples torn apart by the language of holy war, of ethnic conflict, and of unthinkable oppression. Our own nation is victimized by

whisper campaigns of hate, by shrill and malicious political campaigns, and by the poison undercurrents of opportunism and greed. Has our world returned to Babel? Is there any hope for a rebirth of civility and concern for the common good? We must pray for a new Pentecost. We must seek a new spirit. We must find a new language of love - - before it is too late.

If you are looking for a new way to experience a Pentecost of understanding and unity, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.