

A Spirit for All

*A sermon preached on Acts 2:1-21 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on June 9, 2019*

I.

The great preacher and writer Tom Long tells a story about how years ago, when he was the brand new pastor of a small church, he decided to try out a new teaching opportunity – a pastor’s Sunday school class called ‘Christianity 101,’ or something like that. Like many young pastors, he showed up the next week sure to find a throng of people there eagerly to hear him, but was immediately surprised by what he saw. For there in the room were but three elementary school girls, ready to learn from their pastor. Dr. Long tried to hide his disappointment at so sparse a crowd and instead poured himself into the teaching of these young folks.

The week before Pentecost Sunday, he asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. They didn’t, so Dr. Long excitedly began to paint a picture of that wild and holy day. “Pentecost,” he said, “was the day when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world!” Reflecting later on their response, Dr. Long remembered that “two of the little girls took that rather calmly, but one of them got her eyes as big as saucers. And when she could finally speak, she said, ‘Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!’”

“The beautiful thing about that is not that she misunderstood,” Dr. Long says. “The beautiful thing is that she thought it could have happened in our

church, that God's Spirit could have come even to our little congregation and given us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear.”¹

II.

It's a wild and holy story, this Pentecost narrative, one of breath and fire and tongues, one of innumerable languages and proclamation and hearing, one where Spirit fell on all, one that birthed a church and transformed the shape of the world. And on this Pentecost Sunday of all days, we have to ask ourselves – what might we learn from this story about how God intended the church to be? What glimpses of God might we spot among those earliest disciples in between the blaze and breath of the Spirit set loose in the world? What marching orders might we find in this birthday story for a church thousands of years and miles removed for *our* church, *this* place, *these* disciples today?

With so many images that swirl in our collective memory of Pentecost, I want us to focus on that of **word**. For if you remember, Jesus has now left this earth in a cloud of glory. In parting, he declares to his disciples “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.” With Word made flesh absent, Word-as-Spirit came rushing in like a mighty wind, her first gift at Pentecost the gift of proclamation. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit,” Acts tells us – and note the clarity here that **all** were filled, not just the ones who made the best decisions, or did the most Bible study, or were the most secure or conventionally powerful. “**All** were filled by the Spirit,” the text says, “and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

¹ Thomas Long, “What’s the Gift?,” http://day1.org/3822-whats_the_gift.

Among the many nuances I love about this story, what has resonated with me so much this year is that the very way ordinary humans encountered God's Spirit set loose into the world was in the speaking and hearing of language. For when the Spirit fell, there wasn't one language the disciples spoke but many. When the Spirit fell, the differences in their mother tongues weren't eliminated or collapsed into one, but rather proclaimed and understood. When the Spirit fell, the vast diversity of God's created humankind was honored, lifted up, given power, inhabited and incarnated like the Son who pitched his tent among a particular people.

The particularity of how power is shared here is overwhelming! For *unlike* conglomerates who buy up and whittle down and strip away and homogenize their way into monopolies, unlike candidates who water down and poll-test to appeal to as many of us as possible, unlike the media that would have us believe we aren't enough until our house is just so, or our bodies are just right, or our finances are just sound, unlike the ways of this world that would consolidate power into the hands of the few... unlike all these, God's Spirit poured out and enlivened *particular* languages of *particular* people with *particular* customs, nuances, practices, habits, colloquialisms, sayings, slang, poetry, stories, and memories.² Power fell upon particularities and peculiarities, because **God and God's mighty deeds cannot be whittled down and stripped away and homogenized and consolidated.** God in God's depth and height and length and breadth needed humankind in all its boundless variety and vast complexity to become the

² I'm grateful for the research and study of two particular writers that aided in the preparation of this week's sermon, particularly around the use of language at Pentecost. Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p27-36; Debie Thomas, "The One and the Many," *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2241>.

bearers of the story. The proclaimers of Love made flesh, Christ who was born and lived and healed and taught and walked and heard and bled and died, Christ whose Love for this world could not be defeated by death. They became the proclaimers, the speakers, the revolutionaries, the witnesses of what God has done. Quite simply, they became the church.

And what made this new truth so transformative is that the gift of the Spirit **wasn't just in the speaking, but the gift was also in the hearing**. For when the crowds that had gathered outside that meeting place heard such proclamation, they were bewildered *because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each!* The Medes heard their language; and the Elamites, theirs. People whose mother tongue stretched from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, to Rome, even Cretans and Arabs — each heard their language, their stories, their slang, their poetry! That God, in one writer's mind, “would welcome them so intimately, with words and expressions hearkening back to their birthplaces, their childhoods, their beloved cities, countries, and cultures of origin... seemed to say, “This Spirit-drenched place, this fledging church, this new Body of Christ, is *yours*. You don't have to feel like outsiders here; we speak your language, too. Come in. Come in and feel at home.”³

The crowds were bewildered, of course. Some might have been amazed and deeply curious about what was unfolding before them. But others reached for easy scorn to rationalize the irrational: “they are filled with new wine!,” they sneered, explaining away no less than the power of God with excuses of inebriation.

³ Debie Thomas, “The One and the Many,” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2241>

But Peter who just a few weeks prior had clammed up by a charcoal fire when asked if he belonged to Jesus, whose discipleship was tried and found wanting... Peter now was the one to stand, to raise his voice, and to declare boldly to the crowd what had long been prophesied: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh — *did you hear it again, **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 (**all!**), both men and women (**all!**), in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.” He speaks of signs in the heavens and signs on the earth, “then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

III.

In an earlier season of my life, I was very in touch with the spirit. But not the Holy Spirit, mind you, but school spirit, team spirit, the type of spirit that prizes energy and oomph. I was a middle school cheerleader for my school’s football team, you see, and spirit was what we did! We led pep rallies with painted faces, we made meticulously-decorated banners for the team to run through onto the field, we whipped the crowds up to cheer mightily (and, often times, unsuccessfully!) for our football players.

One such cheer was a staple in our repertoire, and then when I got to high school, a perennial classic there too. It was different from the rest, because it meant turning and directly engaging with the other team’s fans and cheerleaders. *We’ve got spirit, yes we do! We’ve got spirit how ‘bout you?* To which the other side would echo, *We’ve got spirit, yes we do! We’ve got spirit how ‘bout you?* This would go on back and forth a bit, and then someone would grow impatient and change the chant: *We’ve got more! We’ve*

got more! Louder and faster and sharper it grew until a big play was made on the field, or until the band director got tired of hearing it and started up the umpteenth rendition of “Eye of the Tiger” to drown us out.

Relatively harmless middle school peppiness aside, this is what we humans do, right? Particularly, I’m afraid, those among us who call ourselves Christian. If ever we wonder about God’s favor, if ever we worry that God’s approval will fall away from our own, if ever we struggle to locate God’s presence, if ever we feel threatened in our convictions and double down on our claim to God’s Spirit, we look to the opposing team, the other side, the opposite viewpoint and try to claim superiority. We shift our focus to the others to our right and left, others around the fringe or in centers that aren’t our own. We question their validity, their standing, their rank with God. We demand to know under what authority they make the claims they do, while resting assured and unexamined in our own place in the landscape of things. We get impatient, we abandon any attempt at constructive conversation, we fool ourselves into thinking that this matters for the sake of the world, all the while ignoring the game, the need, life, God’s work of Love unfolding right in front of us. We bring to life what you know Anne Lamott so acutely named: “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”⁴

IV.

Dr. Fred Craddock understood that temptation, and once shared another story about the first church he served as a young pastor. It was a small church in East Tennessee, not too far from the city of Oak Ridge. It was

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*.

a city that grew and changed as technology did, and with that, the people of Oak Ridge changed as well. The small towns and country communities around it also grew, filling with single men and families drawn to the area to work. Some people even lived in tents or trailer parks while they worked to save enough money to either return home and buy a place, or settle more permanently in the Oak Ridge area.

Dr. Craddock's church was located very near where all these new folks had moved — a lovely little white church with a pump organ, pews hand hewn from a poplar tree, and kerosene lamps hanging all around the walls. It was a warm and inviting-feeling little church, one whose pastor felt he should invite all these new folks to the city in to experience. Just imagine his surprise when his congregants weren't as excited to invite new people as he was. "Oh, I don't know," some would say, "I just don't think they'd fit in here." "Why spend the energy on outreach when these 'construction people,'" as someone called them, "would be leaving pretty soon?"

"No no," Dr. Craddock would say, "we need to invite the people in and make them feel at home, even if they would only be local for a while." Well as churches tend to do, they argued round and round about it, and even chose to vote on it the following week. When they sat down the next Sunday, a member of the church stood up and said, "I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county." Someone quickly seconded it, and before you knew it, the measure passed. When Dr. Craddock voted against the measure, he recalls being reminded that he "was just a kid preacher" and he didn't have a vote. He left that church soon after.

But years later, Dr. Craddock and his wife were traveling near Oak Ridge, and he decided that he wanted to take Nettie to see that little white church. It was hard to find, that little place, because the roads had changed over the years – the interstate, the country road, and finally the gravel road that would take them to the pretty church with the kerosene lamps and the pump organ and the hand-hewn pews. As they drove down the gravel road, he finally saw the church set back in the woods, gleaming white. Much to his surprise, the parking lot was full! Everywhere he looked, he saw trucks and cars and motorcycles packed into the lot. In awe, Fred and Nettie drove around and saw that the church even had a new sign on the front of the building: "Barbecue, all you can eat."

It was then that Dr. Craddock quickly realized that the church was no longer a church; for it had become a restaurant. It was packed with all kinds of people: locals and tourists, old folks and young folks, single folks and parents with little kids, construction workers and teachers, Medes and Parthians and dwellers in Mesopotamia – **all** kinds of people. Dr. Craddock looked over the crowded former sanctuary and then over at his wife, Nettie, and said, "It's a good thing this is still not a church, otherwise these people couldn't be in here."⁵

V.

The late Oscar Romero once said: "A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under

⁵ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 28-29.

anyone's skin, a word that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that?"⁶

On this day in the history of the world when the power of God is bestowed on the people of God,⁷ what kind of church will we be? What kind of word will we proclaim? What kind of gospel will we share?

So friends, receive the power of the Spirit's proclamation. Be enlivened by the Spirit for the sake of the world in this time and place. Inhabit your particularities and peculiarities, and celebrate that God in Christ through the Spirit has come for all, gifted all, inspired all to live as if this story we tell matters. Turn your gaze from the other team and the other side towards those God demands that we love and serve.

I wonder what might happen if we dared to imagine that it could happen here, that God's Spirit could come even to our congregation and give us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear.

I wonder if we might just be set on fire.

Amen.

⁶ As quoted in Father Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, p8.

⁷ Thanks to Will Willimon's commentary, *Acts*, in the *Interpretation* series for this turn of phrase, p28.