

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Acts 2:1-21

How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (Acts 2:8 N.R.S.V.)

It's a God Thing

In our Old Testament passage, we have the story of the tower of Babel. One of my Old Testament professors pointed out that it is not an accident that the word "Babel" sounds like the first part of Babylon, the great city of the Babylonian empire. This story is a poke at their pride and arrogance.

The story tells us that some people became so arrogant that they decided to build a tower that would reach into heaven. It is another way of saying that these people wanted to be like God having all power and knowledge. We are then told that God came down and confused their languages so that they couldn't understand each other and progress on the tower ground to a halt.

I have always suspected that God did not have to try all that hard. Not only is it hard for us to understand when people speak to us in Spanish, or Japanese, it is often hard for us to understand people who are speaking English. In this election year, we see advertisements for the candidates we dislike, and we can't for the life of us understand why anyone would back that candidate. It is as if they are speaking a whole different language.

The result of this is that we as a people are fragmented. We are always pulling apart and pulling in different directions.

In our lesson from Acts, we read about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the first disciples. The Holy Spirit had been in the world always. The Holy Spirit was present at the creation of the universe. Yet in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit whispered only to the prophets, not to the average person.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit falls upon all believers. This is the reverse of the tower of Babel. Now believers are not only able to hear God speaking, they are also able to understand each other.

Although this gift of the Holy Spirit is often called the gift of tongues, it might better be called the gift of hearing. In verse eight, the people gathered ask, “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” That ability to hear and understand what is spoken draws believers together.

The major theme of Jesus’ great prayer in John 17, is found in verse 11. “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one with God and one with each other. The coming of the Holy Spirit was the beginning of the fulfillment of that prayer.

Now let me just stop here for a moment and point out to you that even when we speak the same English language. We still need lots of help hearing each other. This is kind of a side point, but it is an important one.

Experts have pointed out that most people in an argument are not actively listening to the other side. Instead they are using the time when the other person is speaking to think about what they themselves are going to say next. It takes a real effort to set aside our need to make our argument and really hear what the other person is saying.

The second part of active listening that is hard, is for us to take the time to identify common points of value. Most of the time we will have more in common with the person we are talking to than differences. But we have been trained to focus on the differences. Is it any wonder we have trouble understanding each other?

If we are to become one, as Jesus prayed, we need the help of the Holy Spirit to take the time to really get to know each other, and to take the time to listen for understanding before we speak.

Let’s move on. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a God thing. It is something only God can do. In our Acts passage the results are dramatic and instant. The Apostle Peter is transformed from a cowardly fool into a courageous and dynamic speaker. Not very long before this, Peter refused to admit even to a serving girl that he was with Jesus. Now here he is standing up before a big crowd and courageously preaching the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

There is clearly a God thing going on here, not only in Peter’s speaking, but also in the crowd’s response. We are told that 3,000 people were added to the believers that day. Most of us preachers would be happy if just three people were added to the believers each time we preached. Three thousand were added that day, can you even imagine that?

That was a very dramatic thing. Most of the time, the work of the Holy Spirit is much more subtle. A professor is sitting at his desk one evening after an exhausting day of teaching. He leafs through his mail and picks up a magazine that was not even addressed to him. The magazine falls open to an article titled, “The Needs of the Congo Mission.” He begins to read the article and suddenly he is consumed by these words, “The need is great here. We have no one to work the

northern province of Gabon in the central Congo. And it is my prayer as I write this article that God will lay his hand on one -one on whom, already, the Master's eyes have been cast- that he or she shall be called to this place to help us.”

Professor Albert Schweitzer closes the magazine and writes in his diary: “My search is over.” Dr. Schweitzer gives himself to work in the Congo and becomes one of the most effective and widely know of all missionaries. (Dynamic Preaching, May 2016, pg. 39)

Was it just chance that the magazine was delivered to the wrong address? Was it chance that Dr. Schweitzer just happened to open it to that very place and start reading that impassioned plea? We believe that it was not chance, but rather the work of the Holy Spirit. And while it seems to have happened in an instant, the Holy Spirit had doubtlessly been working on the professor for some time before that.

The working of the Holy Spirit is sometimes dramatic, but more often subtle. A pastor tells of a woman in his congregation who had become increasingly concerned about a practice taking place in her workplace, and how she determined to speak up. He asked her, “How did you have the courage to stand up to your boss and tell him that you thought what he was doing was dishonest?”

She replied, “You know me. I tend to be a shy person. But when I walked into his office and began speaking, it was almost like I was given the words to say. I was speaking beyond my ability. It was like a power overtook me and I just spoke up.” (Pulpit Resource, May 15, 2016, pg. 21)

Her pastor then told her that he knew what had empowered her. It was the work of the Holy Spirit. When we are open to the working of the Spirit, we are able to do much more than what we would ever imagine.

Today we celebrate the birthday of the Christian Church on that first Pentecost so long ago. We also celebrate that the same Holy Spirit that was present then, is present with us now. Things are happening among us that no one could predict and that are beyond our control. Look around you this morning. The Holy Spirit is at work here and now.

I know that we Presbyterians are sometimes called “God’s Frozen Chosen.” We are not very demonstrative on the surface. Yet our faith runs deep. Below the surface, things are in motion, changes and transformations are taking place. The Holy Spirit is on the move. Can’t you feel it?

As we go to a time of silent prayer and reflection, ask yourself, “What did I hear God saying to me in the scripture and sermon?”

Ask yourself also, “What am I going to do in response?”

Amen.