

“Overcoming Babel”

June 5, 2022

Living the Spirit Life series – Pentecost Sunday

It’s Pentecost! A clergy colleague suggested that we should celebrate every chance we get, and she throws confetti, too. That’s appropriate today as we celebrate. We get to read the list of all the people who were there in Jerusalem when the Spirit came - wind, fire, loud voices, many languages. It all makes for what I like to think felt like holy chaos - absolutely amazing and deeply moving AND totally disconcerting and out of control. For any of us who like control or to know what’s coming next, Pentecost might be a rough day! We might relate to those who walk by and wonder what’s going on. You’re in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks - this harvest festival - and then BOOM! Come, Holy Spirit! Holy chaos!

Even saying that may bring some uncertainty because we struggle to understand the Holy Spirit. We may have questions. We can give the pat theological answer - the Holy Spirit is one person of the Trinity, or if we want to keep going, we could say the Spirit is God’s movement in the world. We can try to explain that the Spirit is personal - as close as our very breathing - and yet the Spirit is elusive and invisible like the wind; we can’t see it, but we know its power.

The Spirit isn’t something we simply feel or something we possess or have. It seems more fitting to say that the Holy Spirit is experienced. If Pentecost is anything, it’s an experience - and a reminder that the Spirit moves and surprises. As I’ve thought about the Spirit’s presence, holy chaos seems right. When I think of what happened to the thousands of people when the Spirit came upon them, it’s holy chaos.

Perhaps the day had similar sounds to the story of Babel in Genesis 11 - when the people wanted to build a tower to reach God, but God saw fit to give them multiple languages. The account of the Tower of Babel is an explanation of why we have many languages; it’s an attempt to help us understand who we are and why things are the way they are. And yet I wonder if there was a connection.

I’ve always been fascinated with languages. I like learning languages and hearing the nuances of language. I studied Spanish, German, and Greek in college and seminary, though I’ve also learned that language must be used consistently if you want to keep it up. I love accents and pride myself on being able to detect the slightest one to try to guess where it might be from. I love that after almost 22 years

of marriage, I can understand enough Serbo-Croatian to know what's being talked about and then able to respond.

So, both Babel and Pentecost are right up my alley. One is a time of chaos and confusion when people don't understand one another, and the other at Pentecost is this moment of chaos and community - when the Spirit makes a way forward for people from all over. Pentecost must sound the same as Babel, though - this collection of voices and languages and inflections and accents from many places. Karen Booth offered a great comparison - the international terminal at an airport where there are people from everywhere speaking in their native languages.

Amazingly, miraculously, at Pentecost, they can understand each other. And they find themselves speaking Good News - loudly, unrestrained, not caring at all what others thought even when they thought they were drunk, and inviting others to join them in worshiping God. It's incredible to think that these same people who had first locked themselves in a room after Jesus' resurrection with so much uncertainty are now running the streets of Jerusalem high on the Holy Spirit!

Though it may seem difficult to get that real sense of Pentecost, I wonder if it's easier than we think. After all, we don't look alike or sound alike. We don't all relate to worship in the same way. And yet there are those moments when God brings us together. I feel that here and when I'm gathered in other places like Annual Conference. And beyond these doors, we know that all around the world, Jesus followers come together by the power of the Holy Spirit. Think about how many people gather today for all around the world to worship God.

But what do we long for when we reflect on Pentecost? What do we wish for? Do we long for more diversity in our community? What of different languages, cultures, and traditions? Do we offer one another space to worship? Are we willing to embrace one another as people of God who bring ourselves wholeheartedly - younger and older, seasoned or new to church and faith, familiar with this area or coming from somewhere else?

If we want to be people who embrace the power of the Holy Spirit, then we must pay attention to the holy chaos that was and still is Pentecost. Gospel writer Luke does his best to describe it, but I'm sure even he can't do it justice. What he's clear about is that everyone learned something new that day. Life with Jesus wasn't the same because the Spirit transformed the community forever and for good. Luke is clear that the Holy Spirit is experienced - not claimed or tamed, not grabbed or gotten, but experienced and felt in such a way that people are never the same.

And it's also the moment when the church is given the power to be, to do, to act. It's the time when people are literally moved to speak - and in speaking the church finds a voice that shares Good News of Jesus who reigns with God and keeps the promise of an Advocate, a Helper, a Counselor, a Guide, and even the Challenger and Convicter. Maybe that's even more clear as we look at the world and seek God's help to make needed changes so that the world is safer.

The church has come outside, and suddenly, the word is out, and the invitation is for everyone to experience the salvation of God. There are those who want to make sense of what's happening. Surely, it's something brought on by drunkenness. Whatever they're witnessing - whether it's loud or surprising or confusing - it's enough to make them wonder. And it's a reminder that the Spirit's movement doesn't always make sense to everyone. The ways that the Spirit moves may surprise us. That's true in the church and the world.

And yet, the Spirit doesn't stop moving just because people don't understand it's working. The Spirit is making connections. The Spirit is building community. The Spirit breaks through barriers that we create and takes down barriers that we put up. The Spirit keeps us focused on what's important - the message of salvation and new life in Jesus Christ! That's the promise of Jesus - the Spirit moves ahead of us and prepares the way.

The Spirit was calling out for people to respond, and they did! Peter reminds the crowd of the prophet Joel and the promise of the Spirit poured out on all - everyone - without exception. The power of Pentecost is real and radiant. It's power that can't be contained and must be shared.

Luke is clear to say "they were all together in one place." So, the power of God isn't for one person to hold onto. It's power that's most alive and visible when people are gathered together - in worship, times of fellowship, and yes, even in meetings as we plan and prepare! God works with real people to fulfill God's promises.

The Holy Spirit's presence is always clear to me when we celebrate ordination at Annual Conference. Rev. Kim Bos was ordained on Friday night, and it was powerful to witness. And it's always a reminder that all of us are called to ministry.

The Holy Spirit is God's power channeled for God's purposes. The Spirit gives power to speak God's Word in ways that people understand. The Spirit gives power to think in new and fresh ways. Sometimes the Spirit nudges (or pushes harder!) to

send us beyond what is comfortable, and sometimes the Spirit tells us to stay where we are. We can be sure that the Holy Spirit is still working!

Perhaps you're seeking God; you need a revival of spirit, a rekindling of passion for doing God's work, a renewal of energy for your ministry, a chance to hear God speak in a way you understand, or maybe you need some rest and reminder that the Spirit is alive and working.

That's what Pentecost is about – wind and fire are weak descriptions of what happened that day in Jerusalem. But God seeks to help us in our daily lives through the power of the Spirit. We are called to be prophets who tell God's truth. We are called to be visionaries who see beyond what's visible and current. We're called to be dreamers who hope beyond what is reality, and we need dreamers to help us build a safer, more loving, and more gracious world. And it's the Holy Spirit – that power we struggle to understand and sometimes overlook – that helps us do it.

So, I pray that we'll pay attention - even spend some time in quiet - to hear how the Spirit is speaking and moving to help us understand one another better for the sake of the work of the Kingdom, for the mission of making disciples and the call to share God's grace.

May it be so as we come to the table of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The Tower of Babel

11 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.