

## FROM MANY ONE OR FROM ONE MANY

ACTS 2:1-21

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Issaquah Community Church

We've arrived at Pentecost and the church is alive with the colors of red. We have a beautiful Pentecost banner and people all wearing shades of red as well. Our communion table is alight with the evocation of the tongues of fire we heard that came to rest above the heads of each of those gathered disciples. But that the idea of coming to rest is a bit off because fire never comes to a rest until it is no more. Until then it dances about filled with energy and possibility. Maybe those of us in red should get up and start dancing around like fire. Dancing in the church? Oh my....

But the first churches I attended never even observed a day of Pentecost in worship even though it is one of the three major feast days of the church—the only one left that's not commercialized? You may wonder what's the focus of Pentecost? We know why Christmas is important—the birth of Christ the Lord. And we know why Ester is important—the death and resurrection of Christ the Lord! But what are we celebrating at Pentecost? And what kind of story is celebrated with tongues of dancing fire, and with speaking in foreign tongues of speech. What does any of that have to do with the focus of this feast day? Why celebrate it?

The Western World hosted quite a birthday celebration of its own this past week. And the focus of that celebration was quite clear. The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D day. Wow! Did you take time to see some of the festivities with all the Pomp and Circumstance of dignitaries thanking the final remaining soldiers who stormed the beaches? The men who fought. The women who made it possible on the home-front, the people Tom Brokaw called the greatest generation because they risked everything for everything they believed. The internet says members of The Greatest Generation were born between 1910 and 1924, making the youngest around 93 years old and the oldest 108. Lavinia, Barbara's mother surprised her children a few years back when she revealed that she was a Rosie the Riveter on the home-front—she and her sister worked at a shipyard in San Diego CA. Were any of you old enough to be part of our WWII effort. Alas, there are fewer and fewer. But we know the focus of that celebration because they were a generation who stood for values worth cherishing.

What are the values we are called to cherish in celebrating Pentecost? That's a real question. Otherwise celebrations are just about reaching a milestone—like another year since one's birth. The best celebrations are about values worth being lifted up, cherished, and applauded. So, the short answer to the question, the milestone answer to the question “What are we celebrating at Pentecost?” is: the birthday of the church. But the answer to the question of what are the values we are called to celebrate at Pentecost.... Well...that is a more important question. That's the one that has to do with these tongues of fire and tongues of other languages.

It's always good to remember that what we call Pentecost was originally the Jewish festival of Shavout. Jews gathered from all over the Mediterranean world to celebrate God's provision in their lives with another year of bountiful harvests, what the Jewish people call the Festival of Weeks. Greek speaking Jews called the festival Pentecost because it always occurred 50 days after Passover—and in Greek Pente means—5, and the “costῆ” adds the zero for 50. Pentecost occurs seven weeks after Easter as a festival to express gratitude for God's provision.

Luke tells us that something astounding happened that created a commotion. What sounded like a gale force wind swept through the place they were gathered but it was the woosh of fire rather than wind. And the fire settled above the heads of those who were praying in the name of Jesus. The commotion was so great that other Shavuot celebrants gathered to see what was going on and were amazed. The cacophony of sound and the pyrotechnics of flames astounded them. But what astonished them the most was that they heard the prayers and praise of Galileans praising God in their native languages.

It wasn't that Jesus followers had all signed up for a quick language lessons on a Babel app. They were just praising God in their own language of Aramaic. But these Galileans would had the twang of North Country hillbillies in their speech, didn't sound like Galileans. In fact, the foreigners who heard them were all astounded that the Galileans were praising God in their language rather than Aramaic. One man said with surprise, "Why are these Galileans praying in Latin?" And the man beside him would say, "What are you talking about, they're in the Punic language?" A third man would interrupt and say, "No, No! They're all praying in Parthian. How can they all speak Parthian?" Luke tells us they were amazed and perplexed and kept asking "What does this mean?"

Some resident Jews tried to spin the event, dismissively chalking it all up to drunk festival revelers—"They're just babbling Galileans doing tricks with fire. Hicks from the North country can't speak anything but Aramaic and they can't even get that right." {head shake} "Ignore 'em. They've just had too much to drink." But the festival goers question should be ours as well. "What does this mean?" Why is the birth of the church celebrated with everyone hearing the praise of God in their own language as if God meant them to think that this message was meant for them.

All my Christian life I have heard the Day of Pentecost described as the Birthday of the Church. We all have. But the experience of the Holy Spirit by those festival goers was like the burning bush that Moses encountered in the Wilderness. God was in this thing and it was holy ground. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ was meant to be heard not just in every language. It was meant to move the language of faith out of the language of insiders and share it with everyone to let them know that God is relevant to what they are talking about, what they are concerned about. God speaks your language too!

Peter says this in his Pentecost sermon: "This promise is for you and your children *and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call*"—*for all those who had heard the wonders of God proclaimed to them in their native languages today!* Instead of the birthday of the church, this was the birth of a movement—a movement of holy dissatisfaction with any effort to reduce the grace of God to insider talk that makes one group of people feel like they have a corner on the market of God. Whenever the church starts acting like that, the same thing happens to it as happened to the Temple religion in Jesus day. It gets atherosclerosis, or what my grandparents called—"hardening of the arteries."

The Day of Pentecost challenged a TEMPLE religion that sought to make of many—one. Pentecost was a birthday party where everyone hears what is said in a way that speaks to who they are, to where they are, and to how they are. It does not say, learn our language and become like us and then you can praise God, too. It says God is reaching out to you to meet you where you are. That is what the celebration of the birth of the church is all about. It was born reaching out to people where they are and who they are. It is never meant to say you have to become one

of us to be acceptable to God. What it has said from the day it was born is God speaking through the Spirit saying, “I hear you. I hear your issues? Lets talk and I’ll show you that I care. I’ll show you that I will meet you where you are because I know where you’re coming from.

So once a year we are supposed to join together and celebrate the birthday of the church. Not just for the milestone of its being born, but for the values shone forth in the presence of God like a burning bush on every Jesus follower who was praising God. The mission of the church was never to make people in our image. The mission of the church was to share the gospel in ways that people get that God gets them, God hears them, and God wants them to hear what he has to say in return. Once a year we are called to make sure that we are not letting spiritual atherosclerosis clog up the conversation arteries. We are called to let it be God’s church rather than our the church—a place that reaches out to people who need God rather than people who need us.

Diana Butler Bass, a theologian that writes about the changes that are happening to the church in books and in a regular column for the Huffington Post shared a conversation she had with a seatmate on a recent flight from Chicago to Minneapolis.

“Coming or going home?” she asked the man in his mid 30s dressed for business.

“Going home. Why are you going to Minneapolis?” he asked.

“Speaking at a conference there,” she replied.

“What kind of conference?”

“Lutheran,” she admitted, wondering whether her mother’s advice to not to talk to strangers about religion would be wise to adopt in this moment. But her opened the door; he asked.

He thought about that for a moment and then said: “I used to be Lutheran. I guess I still am. But I don’t go to church anymore. I’m not mad at the church or anything. I appreciate what it gave me when I was young. Went every Sunday. My mother made me. Confirmation, youth group, the whole thing.” [Breathe] “But I just don’t know where it fits anymore. I drifted away. My life is full without church now; it really seems kind of irrelevant. They don’t talk about my questions; [shrug] so there’s not really any reason to go.”

“What questions?”

“Oh. Doubt. Life. Making the world a better place. You know, questions. They seem preoccupied with concerns people like me aren’t dealing with. Church just seems pretty disconnected from real life.”

“Do the questions they’re not dealing with bother you?”

“Oh, sometimes. But mostly I just try to figure them out on my own --with my wife and family—sort of making sense of it as I go along.”

“What do you do on Sunday mornings?”

“Sleep in, mostly. Soccer in a park with the kids. It’s really the only day I spend that kind of time with ‘em. And I listen to books. Audible,” he said, pointing to his headphones which he then put on and touched his device to start it.

Thirty minutes later they landed and walked through the jet bridge together. He waved goodbye and she watched him walk off into his post-Lutheran world. She turned to head out to her conference where the Synod of Lutherans were desperately trying to figure out how to remain relevant. They hoped she had answers for them. As she thought about her seatmate she realized that as long as the Synod delegates thought of themselves, first and foremost, as Lutherans, then they would likely never find a way out of the box of their own creation. They want people to remain true to their cultural heritage, remain obligated to pursue faith in God in the same way it had been practiced for generations before them. Add some guitars. Maybe an Espresso Coffee stand in the foyer. But otherwise, the same Lutheranism experience that had been served up for generations—but was miserably failing now.

Bass knew there wouldn't be any Pentecost tongues of fire dancing above her head as she spoke. But what she had to say would probably sound like she was speaking in a foreign language. They would be too polite to accuse her of being drunk even if they thought she was not making any sense. She knew right then that they would put being Lutheran over being relevant. They already had a plan; the same plan they had been using for several centuries: hope people will show up and stay because they like what they hear. And eventually they will become good Lutherans. And she knew. That's what Spiritual atherosclerosis looks like.

Was Pentecost meant to be something that would one day lead people to become good Lutherans? good Catholics? good Methodists? good Baptists? good Evangelicals? Was the goal to create good churches that teach us how to be good people, raise good families, and make good societies? Don't get me wrong. Those are all noble and wonderful things. But is that what Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit was all about.

What made a difference for those men and women who joyously praised God that first Day of Pentecost—the reason they were gathered is because Jesus Christ had transformed their lives. Jesus Christ was the answer to the deepest questions they had. And Jesus gave the church the gift of the Holy Spirit to help them stay relevant and keep meeting people who need God. But for people to find faith the church has to speak their language in ways they can hear. The church is not meant to be a lifeboat as a refuge from the world. The church was meant to go into the world and speak the language of God in the way people can make sense of it in their lives. If it did that, the Post-Lutheran man Butler Bass met would still be there with his family. *The greatest crisis the church has today is that it has forgotten how to speak the language of the people it hopes will listen.* We spend most of our time talking to ourselves about how we wish our children and grandchildren can realize why what we are talking about matters so much.

The task of the church every Pentecost is to ask the question, “Is anyone hearing us? Is anyone listening to us? Who are we speaking to? And what are people hearing when we do speak? Are we pandering? Are we holier than thou speaking? Are we fear-mongering? Are we just trying to be hip? Are we preaching for a return to 1955 to make the church great again? Are we preaching that social justice is the only thing that matters? Or are we letting the Holy Spirit speak through us about the things that really keep people awake at night?”

Pentecost celebrations are meant to be like a yearly doctor's visit for a spiritual health exam. The Holy Spirit has some questions for us. Given who we are and what is possible for this community of faith given its people and resources—how can we talk about why faith in God and faith in Jesus really matters for the questions people face in life. Peter addressed the questions those people had on the Day of Pentecost. But those aren't the questions people are asking now.

What we need is churches explaining how the love of God can meet people at their time of need today. And if we can do that, then they will understand why it is that Jesus is the hope of their salvation.

To do that we need to feel some holy dissatisfaction over the diagnosis the Holy Spirit makes. Are we willing to make the changes in spiritual diet and spiritual exercise and spiritual nourishment necessary to speak the language of heaven in words that address the real questions people in our world are asking?

So, flame on Issaquah Community Church; let the Pentecost winds blow. Your task this Pentecost season is to ask the question whether spiritual atherosclerosis has set in. If so, what language will you need to speak to reach people like that post-Lutheran man? How do we reach him with the message of the Jesus he never really knew? Your search committee will need to identify a Pentecost-worthy vision and then identify the budget that would be needed to help make that happen. Only then will you be ready to look for a pastor who will dare to let the Holy Spirit translate that vision into a language people hear speaking that speaks to their deepest needs.

Your task this Pentecost season is to imagine how you can create a commotion of pyrotechnical prayer & praise that people are meant to hear as a surprisingly relevant language of Heaven. If you do it right some of the people looking at the congregational profile you will create in your pastoral search process will ask, "What are these people nuts? Churches can't do that? Were they drunk when they wrote this? Would a church really be willing to do that?"

If you dream a big vision, like those women and men Peter spoke of who would dream dreams and see visions of what God can do, then the person the Holy Spirit has already chosen to be your pastor will say, "Finally! A church that gets it. Oh, Lord, I hope this congregation dares to call me to serve them in Issaquah."

Will you dare to dream what seems impossible? Dare to appear a bit crazy like those people appeared on the day of Pentecost? If you do, the Spirit of Pentecost may be born anew in Community Church of Issaquah. And it will lead out ahead of you.

Amen?

Amen.