

Pentecost Sunday
June 4, 2017

"NOW YOU'RE SPEAKING MY LANGUAGE!"

by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 2:1-21 ~ John 7:37-39

Today is Pentecost, the day the Spirit gave birth to the church. No Spirit, no church. And where the Spirit abides ... the church abides. Does that mean Pentecost is still happening? And if so, is it happening here?

Many ago, a young woman visited our church in Texas and sat towards the back in "my" pew. Yes, it's true ... I was one of those folks who always sat in the same spot. Good thing we don't have anyone who does that here! Like any good church member, I helped her find the hymnal and fill out the visitor's card. But in spite of my charm and the beauty of our service, this young woman got up and left before the sermon even started. Curious, I followed her out into the nathex to ask why she was leaving and whether something had offended her. She said, "I'm not from around here, but in my church we usually handle snakes."

Different people look for different signs that God's Spirit is present. For some it's quiet reverence and a sense of the mysterious holy Presence. For some it's good order and a cognitive message based on scripture that inspires right thinking. And for others it's dancing in the aisles, speaking in tongues, and maybe even handling snakes. What is the language of the Spirit for you?

Today is Pentecost, and Pentecost is about our learning the language of the Spirit. We are remembering the miracle of the birth of the church ... when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers. Young and old, men and women, too, they all began to preach a new word from God. A diverse collection of Jews from many nations and cultures each understood the message in his or her own native tongue. And the response was overwhelming.

What was the miracle of Pentecost? Was it a one-time event, or does it still happen today? Do we read this story as historical recital ... or as normative guidance for life in the church? We have already seen that every Sunday is Easter in the church. Every Sunday is a celebration ... and a remembering of the resurrection ... not just a memory ... but an experience of it. Is every Sunday Pentecost, too? Are you a Pentecostal Christian? Is this a Pentecostal church?

The Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost. Does that mean God had not been with them since Jesus left? I thought God was everywhere ... all the time. Well yes ... God is ... but most of the time God is still and silent ... watching and listening. At other times we experience God more directly, more forcefully ... and God leads us beyond the boundaries of our comfort zones in ways that exceed our own abilities or ideas. The Holy Spirit is not a substance, but a presence. "Holy Spirit" is what we call the variety of ways that we encounter the invisible, mysterious presence of the eternal God within ... and among ... and around us. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is the still, small voice of prayer ... giving comfort and reassurance. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is the *discomforting* voice of conscience ... causing conflict and confrontation ... and what the old-

timers used to call "conviction of sin." Sometimes the Holy Spirit is a guiding force ... giving challenge ... calling and pushing us past the boundaries of our prejudice and fear.

"Holy Spirit" is the name we give to the evidence that God is with us. Like Moses on Mount Sinai, we cannot see God ... only the glory that lingers where God has passed. Like the wind Jesus told Nicodemus to consider ... we cannot see God, but we feel the push ... we see the signs that show that the Spirit is working. The moving tree is not the wind itself ... but evidence that the wind is blowing. Moving people are the signs of the Spirit. And at Pentecost the evidence is clear ... the sound like a mighty rushing wind ... tongues of fire ... people gathering ... people preaching ... people responding to the good news. Each understands the message in his or her own language.

Some of them go back to their native land, carrying the gospel there. But others in this diverse group remain. In spite of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences, they are so unified that they share everything in common and no one goes needy. They gather frequently to worship and enjoy each other's company. They eat together ... and pray together ... and share communion together. The second chapter of Acts starts with a small band of disciples meeting in an upper room to pray ... and it ends with three thousand more gathering to pray. And all of this is surrounded by a supernatural joy.

So you see, there is not just one sign of the Spirit ... but many signs of the Spirit in the story of Pentecost. These signs are not unambiguous. At least one group of people thought that the Christians were drunk ... that such a high must be chemically induced. But for those who believed, the signs were clear ... God was active in Jerusalem that day ... fifty days after the crucified Jesus rose from the dead.

But what about today ... fifty days after our wonderful Easter Sunday celebration? What are the signs that the Spirit is active in this place? How do we know that God is with us in our own church ... or working in the wider world today? What are the indications that the Spirit is at work in your own life or mine? If not, it seems to me that Pentecost ... and maybe the Bible as a whole ... is simply history ... an interesting study of what happened once upon a time ... but with no real bearing on our time and our world today.

Well, one of the signs that the Spirit is at work according to the Pentecost story is you being the preacher ... that there are always plenty of preachers in the church. Protestants call this "the priesthood of the believers" ... which means, among other things ... that you are preachers, too ... and that the job of the clergy is to enable your voice as proclaimers of the good news.

James Forbes, the astounding preacher at Riverside Church in New York City grew up in the Church of God. He was a minister's son, but people made him feel unworthy because he didn't speak in tongues. Whenever they gathered for worship, the truly spiritual would dance and sing and speak ecstatically ... while someone else might interpret what they were saying. It was a way of showing everyone that God had taken hold of you. He wasn't going to fake it ... and he prayed for the gift ... but it never came. Well, Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that not everyone has the same evidence of the Spirit ... that there is no single way to assess that God is at work through you ... so don't ever let anyone make you feel you are less spiritual than they.

But, as Dr. Forbes considered the miracle of Pentecost, he came to ask, "What are the languages in which we need the Spirit to interpret the gospel today?" The Bible has been translated into

almost every living language, but many have not yet understood what it says. Working in the cultural mix of New York City and the diversity of Riverside Church, Dr. Forbes came to realize that even we who speak English often don't speak the same language. There are subcultures that go with every different walk of life ... a set of values ... a collection of rituals ... a view of the world ... and even a special dialect that only the people in that subculture understand. Teachers, welders, politicians, truck drivers, and even college professors have a subculture of their own and a special language that outsiders don't usually comprehend.

Most of us live in several of these subcultures ... and move back and forth between them ... though not always with ease. When my children were teens I seldom understood a single thing they said to their friends. But it's not just an issue of teenage slang. For instance, the business executive who comes home and treats her husband like an employee winds up with marital problems ... because she's still speaking corporate commander instead of loving partner. The therapist who analyzes his children as if they were patients winds up losing his patience. We come into our own church culture at 1st Congregational UCC, and we have our own special language that we use here and not out there. We talk about God's Country Kitchen, the Knights of the Reading Round Table, the GEC, OCWM, the Four-to-Fives and Sole-4-Souls. Outsiders have no idea what we mean. Even words like narthex and sacristy may seem foreign. Ask some of the newcomers. It takes a while to learn the culture. And that's okay, that's normal. It's even important for the sake of our own unique identity.

But the challenge, according to Forbes, is to let the Spirit lead us to translate the language of the gospel into the other subcultures around us ... even across enemy lines ... to preach the good news in ways they can understand. That's why God needs all of us to be preachers. We clergy speak the language of the church, but we don't necessarily understand the language of educators or attorneys or bankers or farmers. How do we preach the gospel to the legislature or the chamber of commerce or the city hall? Only through you who live in those subcultures. And if the church has nothing to say to these other cultures ... then we have become irrelevant, and we might as well close up shop.

Pentecost did not happen in the upper room where the disciples were praying and waiting on God. It just started there. But the real Spirit story of Pentecost happened in the streets of Jerusalem. Do you see the irony of this Pentecostal message? Pentecost is not about how the Spirit takes hold of you here in this place ... it's about how the Spirit takes hold through you beyond this place. It's not about the way you worship God on Sunday ... it's about the way God speaks through you Sunday through Saturday. It's not about how God makes you feel when you worship ... it's about the way God makes others feel through you when you serve. Pentecost is not about what happens here at church ... Pentecost is about us being church in the world.

The mission that Christ gave us is to enter the wider dialogue of human life ... bearing witness to God's love in the same way that Christ did. That means our preaching is not a long soliloquy where people's minds wander ... or a carefully written theological lecture ... but a dialogue, a conversation ... where listening is as important as talking ... and acting is as communicative as speech. And the fact that you go out as Christians ... communicating by your words and deeds ... who God is to the people you encounter in your other cultures day by day ... is at least one sign that the Spirit of Pentecost is at work in our church.

I must mention many other signs of the Spirit among us today. The calling that God has given us ... step by step through the last one hundred and thirty years ... to open the doors ... and the full

communion of the church ... to all races, genders, orientations, and economic classes ... to all the diverse humanity God created. This is not a natural human gesture. Humans are naturally tribal and keep closely to their own kind. But our church has been pushed by the Spirit to find the unity of God's presence in the diverse human family ... and that is a sure sign to me of God's Spirit at work. In the years I have been here I have witnessed extraordinary acts of forgiveness, kindness, generosity, and love that I believe could only have come from God. I have seen people change their minds, change their behavior, be healed from old wounds, from addictions, from unbearable sorrows. I have seen people grow and move out of their comfort zones to care for lost and lonely souls, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, to talk to their neighbors, to welcome the stranger. Whether you know it or not, you are Pentecostal Christians. We are a Pentecostal church!

What remains is for us to rejoice and be reassured. What remains is for us to go beyond these walls and preach it to the people out there this week. Let us celebrate that the Spirit of Pentecost is still with us here ... and open ourselves more to be led by God in ways that both console and challenge us. The story of Pentecost begins with a group of disciples praying in an upper room. But the Spirit spilled them out of that room and into the world with the remarkable good news and evidence of God's love that no small upper room could ever contain. The same Spirit ... who has gathered us here in our upper room today ... sends us out to the diverse and needy community of the world to be witnesses of God's love in Christ. And the world will never be the same ... we will never be the same ... because God is with us ... and working in us ...and working through us to heal the world. Then let us rejoice and let us go out in Jesus' name. Amen?

May we pray?

Send your Spirit upon us, O Lord, and make us so aware of your presence that we are overwhelmed with joy. Then let us carry your light and your love within us to the people who still wait in darkness ... to a world still caught in conflict ... even to a church which has lost its way. Let Pentecost continue among us and we will be your disciples ... we will be your church ... in Jesus' name. Amen.