

Sermon on Pentecost C: Acts 2:1-21

Preached at CLF on May 27, 2007 by Pastor David Van Kley

Like A House Afire

Well, it's Pentecost Sunday again! One of the three great festivals in the Church year—Christmas and Easter being the others. Yet, it comes without much fanfare. There's no "mascot" for Pentecost, like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. It always falls during the late spring, when people are out and about, camping, traveling, celebrating graduations. The pews are not, typically, full.

And then, there are all those place names in today's first lesson. Readers often ask, "Pastor, how do you pronounce this word?" To which we say, "*Phrygia*" or "*Pamphylia*," as if **we** knew what we were talking about!

The festival Christians call Pentecost actually began in the city of Jerusalem, on the **Jewish** feast of Pentecost, which was partly harvest festival, partly a celebration of Moses' giving of the law, and partly just an excuse to hang out and drink wine. A lot like some of our holidays, I guess! Jesus' followers were in Jerusalem for those reasons, I presume, but also because they were continuing to process what they had seen and heard after his death. That is, they had seen **him!** They had seen Jesus alive. And before he left them, they'd heard him say with their own ears that they were not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for God to fill them with the Holy Spirit. Whatever **that** meant!

So they were hanging out, together, waiting, quietly.

Then suddenly, wind like a tornado blew through the room. Tongues of what looked like fire danced between them, among them, on them, but did not scorch them. Silent mouths opened wide, speaking all at once and in many languages.

It was "a house afire!" And people came running the way they do to a burning house. They were amazed. Bewildered. Astonished. Perplexed. They didn't know what to make of it. "What's going on here?" some said; "obviously, **they've** been hitting the bottle!" But others said they heard coherent messages in their own languages, messages about **God!**

When was the last time anyone accused **you** of being drunk on Jesus? Goodness, that's **never** happened to me!

Fast forward some 1975 years. Some say that over 80% of Custer's population does not attend worship on a given Sunday. In our post-modern world, many people consider Christianity passé. As they whiz by our building, they may see, "wow, that Church **looks** cool," but they're not interested in what we're doing **inside** the church. But if the world is turning its back on "religion," polls tell us that it still hungers for God. Yet, we who know the truth of Easter don't now how to tell it. We who have received the light of Christ wonder how to let our little lights shine. So we sit this morning,

together, waiting for something to inspire us, for the Holy Spirit.

Which is a good thing. Maybe, like the disciples, we need space in our lives before God can come. Only when we are silent, will we hear the wind of the spirit. Only when we realize that we are blind will our eyes be opened. Only when we put aside our agendas can we embrace God's agenda for us.

Hush. There. Can you hear the Spirit of God? Can you see him? Can you feel her? Do you know the Spirit? The Spirit **is** here. The Spirit has come, even if we do not experience it through wind and fire so much as through Word and Sacrament and one another. But the spirit is, surely, here. Has been ever since that first Pentecost.

But the Spirit does not come just to comfort us, to make **us** feel spiritual. The Spirit comes with a message for us to share with the world. A message about God.

Unfortunately, many of the messages the world hears **about** God are not **of** God. The other day, I saw bumper stickers on two vehicles in Rapid. One read, "*If you don't believe in Jesus, you'd better have asbestos in your closet when he comes.*" The other read, "*On judgment day, you'll wish **you** had a Jesus sticker.*" Such messages may be witty, but they are not of God. They are meant to condemn the world rather than save it.

In a still more violent way, suicide bombers and terrorists also claim to represent God, but the bloodshed they cause is **not** of God.

For God's message is ultimately one of love. God **is** love, the Bible says. Even God's judgment is intended for this purpose, like a black thread stitched through a many colored blanket. When God sent the waters of the flood, it was to renew the world. When God drowned the Pharaoh and his chariots in the Red Sea, it was to free an oppressed people. When God went to the cross to suffer and die, it was to raise us with Christ from the dead. This God is still at work in the world for the healing of the nations through the risen Christ. This is the message the Spirit empowers us to share!

So we have a message! Yet, the Spirit also empowers us to translate this message into languages people can understand. Without translation, messages are easily misunderstood. In Colombia last February, I went with the pastor of San Pablo church to the home of a man whose legs had been amputated. He was there with his daughter and a little black dog was running to and fro. After the visit, the woman said something in a harsh voice, the only word of which I caught was "Gringo." What did I do, I wondered, that she would call me that? Later I asked the translator about the remark. "It wasn't **Gringo**," he said; "it was **Ringo**, which is the name of the dog, because it has floppy bangs like Ringo Starr, who played drums with the Beatles!" You've got to understand the language of the people you're talking with!

Knowing a language can also get you somewhere with people. On the way back

from Bogotá, in the Miami Airport, I asked a worker, who happened to be Hispanic, how to transfer my luggage to another plane. Since I was mentally still in Colombia, I said, “*Senor?*” And did my best to communicate in my broken Spanish: “*Equipaje? Avion?*” The man smiled until I realized that **he** spoke English! “Sorry,” I said, switching to English. “No,” he replied. “Keep talking to me in Spanish and I’ll do anything you ask! It makes such a difference to hear something in your native language.

Which is why it is **so** important for us to learn other languages. It may be almost as important for us at Custer Lutheran Fellowship to take Spanish or Chinese classes as Bible classes, because the message of the gospel must be translated. But we Americans have a bad record in his regard: we are so provincial!

Of course, we who speak the same language still can misunderstand each other, because our experiences, ideas, and feelings differ. Which is why people under 30 and people over 60 disagree about so many things. The same with people who are black, white, and Indian. The wealthy and the poor. Men and women. Liberal and conservative. It is so important for people to listen to each other so they can speak in languages they can understand.

The other day, Nina Joy showed me a program on the computer called Babelfish, named after the tower of Babel, I suppose, in which you can print a message to someone in one language, hit a button, and the program immediately translates it into the language of your choice. I don’t know how good the translation is, mind you, but I think it’s pretty miraculous! Indeed, that’s what God sent the Holy Spirit into the world to do—to translate through us the message of God’s love into **every** language!

Of course, the Spirit’s language does not always require words. Long ago, St. Francis said to “preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.” It’s hard in misunderstand an act of love. My Colombian hosts spoke little English, but their Pentecost message came through clear as a bell. I saw God in their folded hands before dinner. I tasted it in their home-cooked meals, felt it in the sandals they set down for me outside the door of the bathroom. Traced it in pathways of the tears they shed at the airport, when I left. Being with them, I felt that I’d been touched by God. I had! They told of the mighty acts of God in a language that doesn’t require words.

So Pentecost comes again this day to us. We who know the gospel. We who have been baptized. We who care about the world. We are called, empowered, and sent to share the good news in every language.

Amen.