

(Acts 2:1-21 NRSV)

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.
² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,¹¹ Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

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Powerful and Direct

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Acts 2:1-21.

There is such a thin line between the good and the evil we do. There is such a thin line between the lofty and the base. There is such a thin line between the profound and the shallow.

In Biblical history the two sides of the equation, the sublime and the absurd alternate at a dizzying frequency. Look at the first chapters of Genesis. It starts with the story of creation, a divine event if there ever were one. And at the conclusion of each day, God put the divine stamp on it and proclaimed it good. But already by chapter three, the third chapter of the first book in the Bible, there is trouble in Paradise, and creation's first two people were expelled.

By chapter four the man and his wife have settled into their new lives, however. Children arrive. Farming and hunting go well. They eat from the fat of the land. But before the chapter ends, we have the first recorded murder, and the first family is once again in turmoil.

God pardons Cain and sends him on his way, and he becomes the father of civilization. But by chapter six God has come to the conclusion that this civilization has run amuck. God tells Noah to build an ark, for the mess is about to be flooded. By chapter nine we find a penitent God, who sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign of hope for the future.

By chapter eleven the next phase of civilization is doing swimmingly. They have a common language, and they embark on the first great high rise, the tower of Babel. Even God thought their possibilities were limitless, so much so that the holy one decided to confuse their tongues and scatter the people, because they were getting too big for their britches.

Lord, the speed of reversing directions causes whiplash. If nothing else, these first chapters of the Bible would remind us that things change with breathtaking speed, so be neither too attached to nor too dismayed by present circumstances; things won't stay how they are very long. We'll need to come back to this point.

But first, let me say why I begin where I have this morning. I find it hard to think of the story of Pentecost we heard this morning without thinking of the

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eleventh chapter of Genesis. Way back in the beginning God confused human linguistics, made people speak in a variety of languages, made it so that humans could not understand one another. And why? Because language is a powerful thing. It is the force of communication. It is a window into the mind of God. It is in language that we comprehend and describe our experience, including our experience of God. It is by language that we most approximate the creative power of God. By the communication fostered in language, we create structures, governments and civilizations.

But we work with a flaw. From the beginning human beings, created in the image of God, created with much of the very power of God, created as God's most spectacular sculpture, from the very beginning human beings lost sight of God when they used the power God gave them. The tower of Babel isn't really a story of God mixing up the languages. It is a story of the mixing up of communication that happens when human beings think less of God and more of themselves, when human projects get out of control. The people intent on building a tower on the plain of Shinar said, "Come, let us make a name for ourselves." And in that moment when they grasped after a name for themselves, the holy gift of communication left them, their ability to communicate and cooperate lost.

The tower of Babel, a suitable parable to describe much of the ebb and flow of human history, the tower of Babel and the human capacity to confuse itself, makes the story of Pentecost all the more powerful. Into the midst of human history, marked as it is by human mis-communication, the Holy Spirit broke. Here in the Pentecost story we have gathered in Jerusalem the symbolization of our differences, of our incapacity to understand one another – "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs." Here, into this rattle of speech, the Holy Spirit broke with such power that people were able to understand each other, even though they spoke vastly differing languages. What a powerful and magnificent story.

From this glorious story of Pentecost there are many conclusions to draw, but only two I wish to make today.

First, and most obvious, this reversal of the confused languages of Babel demonstrates how much more we understand when we are listening to the Holy Spirit than when we are listening to our internal voices of self-interest. I can think of nothing which more plagues us today, whether we are referring to the Balkans, the Middle East, East Cambridge, or our families, I can think of nothing which more plagues us today than the pretense of speaking for what is right, when, in fact, we are speaking deeply from self-interest. Is it any wonder? If we use the language of morality or human rights or sovereignty when we are in truth speaking

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about oil or politics or national interests, is it any wonder that we seem to be speaking different languages with each other? Is it any wonder that we, too, live in the shadow of the ruins of the tower of Babel?

The profound lesson in the stories of Babel and then of Pentecost is that if you want to understand one another, if you want to communicate, you had better speak truthfully and forthrightly and avoid speaking dishonestly or half honestly. When you speak out of both sides of your mouth, you are bound to babble. When you speak in tune with the Holy Spirit, you are certain to be understood, and trusted.

The second conclusion I wish to draw today about Pentecost is that the experience of the Holy Spirit which Jesus' followers experienced that day in Jerusalem was direct and physical. There came a rush of wind. There came tongues of fire resting on their shoulders. And then, and only then, came the ability to speak and be understood. The moral of the story is that you should be inspired by the Spirit before you speak. How many fewer extraneous words we would all have to endure were that maxim followed!

But from a personal point of view, this coming first of the Spirit, this coming directly and physically of the Spirit has something else to say to us. It says that the experience of the Spirit, or of God, is first and foremost visceral and firsthand.

Pentecost is fifty days after the Passover; that's how it gets its name – pente. Fifty days after the Passover, fifty days, then, after Maundy Thursday. Forty-nine days after Good Friday. Forty-seven days after Easter. For about seven weeks after all these events Jesus' followers have been in a holding pattern. They have met together, often times fearfully, behind closed doors. They have chosen a successor to Judas. But mostly they have waited.

We have been accused of being a culture which hates silence. A lull in the conversation makes us uncomfortable. Even the brief moment of silence in our pastoral prayer makes some of us fidget. But the message here seems to be that it is into these periods of silence, into these moments when we stop the flow of sentences, into these seasons when we quiet the incessant flow of our language that the Holy Spirit breaks, by the way giving us, then, something worth saying.

Pentecost. Pentecost admonishes us to take up a deep listening, a deep listening into which the voice of the God, the Holy Spirit, will rush like a wind and a fire. And when that wind and fire come upon us, if we but fully experience them, if we but let them roll over us and move deep within us, they will give us a language with which to communicate and create, for we will have been seen through a window into the mind of God, powerfully and directly. If we but communicate what we see there, unlike those at the tower of Babel our language will remain unconfused, like Jesus' followers we will be understood. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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