

May 15, 2016
Acts 2:1-12
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“1,000 Tongues”

Good morning, and happy birthday! For those of us who are part of the church and followers of Jesus Christ, Pentecost Sunday is a day on which we reflect what it means to be the church. It's also a day when we remember and celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit (thank you), as we have been hearing and singing about.

Two Sundays ago, on May 1, we celebrated the anniversary of our first worship service in this building. We recalled the discernment and planning and hard work which went into that process. The church which we celebrate in the Pentecost event of Acts 2 goes back much further than that. It doesn't involve long-term strategies or capital fund campaigns, there are no architectural plans or landscaping design; there are no paid staff, hymnals, or instruments. The birth of the church involves people, the Holy Spirit, and communication. That's it.

Let's take a little closer look at Acts Chapter 2. Reading this passage aloud is basically like hazing for Worship Leaders -- Scott did a great job, thank you. All these crazy names: Galileans -- OK, we get that one, Jesus was a Galilean -- Parthians, Medes, Elamites, folks from Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, and Pamphylia. Pamphylia? Is there where pamphlets come from? I did a little sleuthing -- Pamphylia is an area of Asia Minor: the name means, “Of mixed tribes or races,” which is so appropriate--there's a mix of people even within that list of different people--because I believe that this list of names of places and tribes is intended to be diverse and a bit overwhelming. Of course, these places and tribes would have been familiar to the early readers of Acts, but it isn't their specificity which is important, it's the cumulative effect of a list of people from all over the known world at

that time, which is simply a way of saying “There were all kinds of people there from all over the place.”

Our knowledge of the world and its geography and ethnic groups has expanded somewhat since the first century. It would take all the rest of this sermon and bore you to tears if I tried to list them all -- and I'm sure I'd miss some. But it might help us to enter this biblical account if we thought about some of the diversity of people that we run into in our work and our activities, and maybe even in our families and churches. Let me list a few of mine: There were Democrats and Republicans, Trumpites, Kasichers and Clintonians, people who were pro-life and folks who are anti-immigration. Or, there were Hispanics and Asians and African Americans; people whose parents had been born in this country, and many who had been born in other countries. Or try this one: there were popular kids and mean girls and jocks and band kids and a group of nerds who always sat off by themselves. Salespeople and accountants and managers and marketers and supply-chain analysts. Tell me if you recognize any of these people: conservatives and progressives and pacifists, and those who are open and affirming, those who think the Bible is inerrant, and those who think women should keep silent in church. Whether you consider these grouping individually, or put them together into one big group of people we talk to and interact with every day -- including Sundays -- the effect is an awful lot like Acts 2: that is, there are all kinds of people from all over the place. The author of Acts doesn't say this is good or bad, it is simply a fact of life in first century Jerusalem.

Enter the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit. That's more like it. We don't know exactly what the coming of the Holy Spirit looked like. Acts 2:3 describes it as, “Divided tongues, as of fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them.” One of the joys of preaching on Pentecost is the experience of standing behind the pulpit and seeing many of you wearing red, orange yellow, or white -- just as I saw many of you in royal blue a couple weeks ago. As someone who feels that the visual environment of worship should support the words we read and say and sing, it's especially important to me that on this day, *we are* the visual expression of Acts 2. The church is not a spectator event, *we are* the church. Not buildings, not offices, not pamphlets -- by the power of the Holy Spirit *we are* the embodiment of

Jesus Christ and the mission of God. Not bad for all kinds of people from all over the place.

Slide up Dove of light Nobody knows what the Holy Spirit actually looks like. I spent some happy hours surfing around on Google images to see what kind of things artists have created. This is an image to which I was drawn -- you might remember it from this month's Connection. One image of the Holy Spirit is wind, which is pretty hard to draw: we see the effects of wind, but not the movement of the air itself. Another image of the Holy Spirit is a dove -- an ancient biblical image of God's protection and care, an image of God's blessing and favor which appears in the gospels at the baptism of Jesus. You might see the suggestion of a dove in this image of the Holy Spirit (I certainly did), but I feel like the essence of this image is light and power. This Holy Spirit crackles with energy, and has electricity which raises the hair on the back of your neck. This Holy Spirit is coming with *power*. **Slide down**

And what does the Holy Spirit give the disciples the power to do? Heal? Forgive? Perform miracles? There will be some of that going on later in the Acts of the Apostles, for sure. But for this event, the coming of the Holy Spirit to give shape to all kinds of people from all over the place to become the church, the power of the Holy Spirit is . . . *communication*. Remember, the ingredients of Pentecost are people, the Holy Spirit and communication.

It's probably helpful to step back here a bit and remind ourselves of what has been happening up until Pentecost. The book of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same person as one single narrative, divided into two books. Think JRR Tolkien and the Lord of the Ring series, if that's helpful to you. Book 1 is about Jesus' work on earth, and ends with his resurrection appearances to his disciples and his ascension into heaven. Acts begins with a brief review and this promise from the resurrected Christ: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 2 is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to his disciples: not just the eleven guys who lived with him for three years, but to *all* his disciples. Claiming to be a disciple means committing to be a witness: to all kinds of people from all over the place.

The power of the Holy Spirit, made visible as tongues of fire, falls upon the disciples and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. And what superpower does the Spirit give them? The ability to speak -- to speak in other languages. Speaking in other languages is pretty cool -- I have certainly wished I could speak a different language without the hard work of actually learning it -- but speaking is only part of the equation when it comes to communication. I believe that on that Pentecost day, that the Spirit was present both in speaking and in listening. I'm not sure the listeners figured out what was happening right away: they ask in verse 12 "What does this mean?" and in verse 13 they decide that the disciples are filled with a spirit of a different kind -- the spirit of new wine, not God's Holy Spirit. I think there is some comedic potential here which I won't explore today; clearly it can take the message of the power of God a little while to take hold. I believe that's at least as true today as it was in Jerusalem on Pentecost. But once that Spirit takes hold of Peter's listeners, it spreads like wildfire. We're not told that tongues as of fire rest on the heads of the hearers, but clearly that electric energy of the Spirit is in both speaking and listening. For the good news to be communicated, and heard and internalized and lived, we have to commit to both. Notice the great leveling effect of the Spirit's activity: it empowers all kinds of people from all over the place -- both speakers and listeners - - the limiting factor is not the Spirit's power to enable us to speak or to enable us to listen, the limiting factor is our *willingness* to speak and our *willingness* to listen.

The Spirit doesn't force us to all speak the same language. Part of the miracle of the Pentecost story is that anyone who chose to listen could hear in their own language. The other part of the miracle was that people actually chose to listen. All kinds of people from all over the place became the church by the power of the Holy Spirit because disciples spoke and those who would become disciples listened: three thousand people became the church that day. Praise God for disciples who witness and listen and become the church by the power of the Holy Spirit. God needs and wants and calls all kinds of people from all over the place. [Can you do this with me? Here is the church . . .] Amen.