

Pentecost – Christina Smerick

Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, 25-27

It seems I begin every sermon with a confession, which is probably not a bad thing. As many of you know, I was raised in the Catholic Church, and it's fun now to think back to my child-self and what sense I had of God in that upbringing (which, as many of you know, was a fabulous upbringing, and I remain grateful and indebted and regretful to my CCD teachers and my Franciscan priests who put up with me). But I have to say that aside from muttering 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost' while crossing myself a lot, I don't remember learning a lot about the "Holy Spirit". God was GOD, and Jesus was a little scary and I felt bad for him...and the Trinity kind of ended there. We had prayers to Mary, and many many prayers to God...But boy, I don't remember much Spirit talk.

And so, even as I've been a part of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition now (with some interruptions) for...decades, we'll just say decades, I'm still real uncomfortable with the "Holiness" part. I think the book of Acts may be scary to Catholics. After all, as awesome as Peter is in it, he also gets schooled by Paul. That's just embarrassing. So when I belatedly realized that this was PENTECOST Sunday, I groaned. Oh boy. Holy Spirit? Tongues of fire? Speaking in tongues? Not my forte.

But when I actually re-read the story in Acts (a book I Bible-quizzed on, so I think I Know...) I realized that I conflated this story with other mentions of 'speaking in tongues' in Paul and that the text really reads "tongues AS OF fire" and that's left out of half the translations and that maybe, just maybe, I don't have to be scared to preach on this day. But just to be safe, I went and hid in a passage of Scripture I'm very familiar with, that features prominently in my dissertation of all things: The Tower of Babel. And then I realized that I mis-read that one too. Argh! You see,

there is a typical reading of the story of the tower of Babel that we're all familiar with, and goes something like this: those people got uppity and prideful, and God punished them by scattering them to the four corners of the earth and 'confusing' their language. They were up to no good, and so God had to intervene. Then we move nice and easy to the Acts passage, and looky there, God 'fixes' the problem of the tower of Babel.

The only problem with this reading is that it doesn't actually line up with what the text SAYS. So, the only problem with it is that its not true!

There is a way of reading the Tower of Babel that I'm fairly convinced is a better way: reading it not as a story of punishment and confusion, but as a part of God's plan for diversity and difference.

The passage in Genesis actually sets up this story: the people wanted to gather together, huddled for safety and protection, unified, uniform, 'one'. They wanted to build a fortress that proclaimed their might, and they wanted thick walls to protect them. But most of all, they wanted sameness. "This is only the beginning of what they will do" indeed. We've seen this desire and this tendency before, and it rarely ends well. When one seeks security and uniformity, one necessarily excludes, by force if necessary, anything that challenges that uniformity.

So God does what is best for us—and what tends to feel awful at the moment. God sends them out. He 'mixes' (not confuses) their language. He refused to let them stay safe. It is not that the building of the tower was an act of defiance against God, no. The building of a tower and the making of a name for themselves are common human impulses, not necessarily directed against God. They're just what humans do. But God has a different desire for humanity that what humans have: where humans desire security, sameness, protection, and stability, God over seems to value dispersal, diversity, going out, not huddling in. [Certainly we can see that God follows God's own rules: the 'going out' of Jesus into this world, the 'going out' of the Spirit, are exemplars of the kind of self-emptying risk-taking God seems to value]

This reading of the Genesis story then dovetails with Acts not as bookends: as God bringing together what God tore apart; but rather as a continuation of God's out-going in the world. We have to read Acts carefully this morning—it is a too-familiar passage that is subject to quick scanning and unjustified conclusions. God does not give the listeners ONE LANGUAGE that they now understand. God does not create a unified language, where there was once diversity. Totally not true, right? No, God has people hear the truth of God's love in their OWN LANGUAGE—the diversity of the peoples is maintained, not diminished! Rather, the disciples are given the gift of being able to speak another's language—they do not have the gift of making sameness out of difference, they receive the gift of becoming strange like the stranger, of becoming the essence of hospitality by not requiring those foreigners to learn their lingo, but by speaking the foreigner's speech.

Let that sink in a bit.

Is this not the most beautiful articulation of humility and kenosis? The disciples were emptied of their own language and filled with the language of the Other. That makes me tear up.

John 14 teaches us that the Spirit comes not as a new teacher, but as a teacher reminding us of the work of Christ Jesus. What is that work? The becoming what people need—becoming one of us—in order best to love us and help us. The Acts passage continues the dispersion of the Babel passage—inclusion is expanded to all the peoples of the earth—and God meets them where they are, and speaks to them so they may understand. Diversity is not made uniform in Acts—diversity is expanded, and becomes the mission of this new-born Church. That is totally terrifying and marvelous. As Michael Jenkins puts it: "God is...eternal and living community, differentiated in person, united in love (and) we ourselves are created for community, and never

fully live in God's image until we live in communion. Communion assumes DIFFERENCE, not uniformity, not conformity to a single idealized form of life or nationality or ethnicity or tribe."

Psalms 104 expands this even further. At first glance, it seems out of place—why are we reading a hymn of praise about creation at Pentecost? Because what better reminder of God's inclusivity than to realize that the entire world, the universe, all created being shares in God's goodness? That "every part of life is a GIFT, not a possession"? And that creation is DIVERSE to its core. I was reading an article by Michael Pollan about (sorry) gut microbes (it's a great article, you should totally read it if you have Input as a top strength). It's called "Some of my Best Friends are Germs". He opens with this line: "I can tell you the exact date that I began to think of myself in the first-person plural—as a superorganism, that is, rather than a plain old individual human being." It is when he realized that we are 10% human, and 90% microbes; that 99% of our genetic material is microbial. Does God value diversity, you think? Is it not built into the very structure of life?

"Cultural diversity is the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment of it." (Ralph W. Klein)

But the story of Babel and of Pentecost do not just serve as evidence of God's love of difference and out-going—they also serve, along with John 14, as instances of Endings and Beginnings, of massive change and scary unpredictable stuff. [I imagine that having a tongue as of fire descend on you and foreign words spilling out of your mouth was terrifying as well as exhilarating]. In Acts, we are witnessing nothing less than the birth of the Church: the passage goes on to talk of 3000 people joining our little band. In John, we have backtracked to what had to have been a terrifying, dread-filled time in the life of the Disciples: as I said in my Chapel address this week, they are sensing that an ending is coming, and Jesus knows that this ending is going to freak them out on a whole new level. They want to 'follow Jesus'—and Jesus puts them off, because He knows where He's going: to a gruesome, bloody death. We have, then, New Testament passages that are thrilling on the one hand, and fearful on the other, so fearful that Jesus begins and ends this chapter by speaking these words: Do not let your hearts be troubled. The question cries out from the Gospel of John: What can we take with us, Lord, if not you? When you leave us, how are we not abandoned? As one commentator wrote, "Without Pentecost, Easter and Ascension means departure, and confused disciples." The answer, then, from both the Gospel and from Acts, is that we take God with us. The Spirit of God is with us, and in us, and beside us. And what is this Spirit? It is a Counselor, a teacher, a GIFT that cannot be forced, a peculiarity that will distinguish the disciples from others in the world. The Spirit of God is a reminder who "brings JESUS to mind, and it is JESUS who is the way, the truth and the life." (Philip Turner) As Karl Barth writes, "The Holy Spirit distinguishes Herself (I'm changing the gender, because c'mon) from any other spirit by his absolute identity with the person and work of Jesus Christ...All that is Spirit proceeds from Jesus and results in him." [[In The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostle's Creed.](#)]

Rather than hocus-pocus and magic, the Holy Spirit is the ongoing gift of God to us, and with us, and in us. The Holy Spirit reminds us to do the work of Christ: and that work is the work of going-out, of becoming vulnerable, of learning to speak the language of Others, of finding and staying in Christian community because if God is anything, God is commun-al. Times of change are hard—and if time is about anything, it is about change. Leaving the comfort and safety of one's community, as many of you are doing in the weeks and months ahead, can bring with it existential dread so fierce it feels like something inside you is dying. One's instinct screams to cling, to stay, to barricade oneself where one is safe, and loved, and where everyone speaks the same language. To go out: well, who in their right mind would want to do that? But our minds are not our own, and our tongues are not our own, and our lives are not our own, and out we must go, and we must let the Spirit in to teach us new tongues, and to guide us in forming new communities, and to remind us to trust, trust, trust in the Lord, who gives us, yes, even in times like these, a peace not of this world, a peace that is not grounded in security but is stretched out in love, stretched out like the arms of Jesus on the cross, stretched out to this whole world. The cross was not the end. The ascension was not the end. The gift of the Spirit was not the end, but a beginning, a beginning that is ongoing and that travels with you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Amen.