

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
"The Spirit Poured Out"
June 12, 2011: Sunday of Pentecost
Acts 2.1-21
Pastor John Guthrie

In the old West there was a notorious bank robber who would sneak across the border from Mexico, rob banks in Texas, and then escape back into Mexico before the Texas Rangers could catch up with him. One day, though, the Rangers illegally crossed the border into Mexico and followed the robber into a bar.

When they finally took him into custody, they discovered that he didn't speak any English, and none of the Rangers spoke Spanish. But the bartender informed them that he spoke both Spanish and English and would be happy to serve as an interpreter. So the Rangers asked: "Where did you hide all that money?" And the bartender translated into Spanish. At first, the robber hesitated, but then when he recognized that he was going to jail anyway, he told the bartender where the money was. And the bartender listened carefully as the robber explained how he had hidden it in a certain cave that was just outside of town. The bartender then turned to the Rangers, who were waiting for the translation, and he said: "Jose is a very brave man. He says that you are all a bunch of brainless Texans, and he is not afraid to die."

Language is one of those human inventions that separates us, one people from another. But we see in today's Pentecost narrative, that God even overcomes barriers of language.

The crowd that gathered around the disciples and their friends on that Pentecost Day described in chapter 2 of Acts was dumbfounded that a bunch of assumedly illiterate Galileans were speaking in the languages of much of the Mediterranean world. They were amazed and perplexed, we are told. Some of the crowd assumed they had been drinking too much new wine.

We are not told for sure, but I believe the disciples gathered in that house were more than just the original disciples called by Jesus. By the way, the number of those disciples, soon to be known as apostles, was again twelve since Judas Iscariot had been replaced; you can find that account in the first chapter of Acts. But I believe the ones gathered in that house included the twelve and many others, including the women who are mentioned in chapter 1. There is a reference in chapter 1 of about 120 believers who were gathered in Jerusalem, waiting for the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised. It's pretty difficult to believe that 120 people could fit into a typical house of those days, but maybe they were also in the courtyard of the house.

They had been waiting, as Jesus had instructed them. And they had been praying. All they knew was that Jesus had promised them a baptism of the Holy Spirit, the same baptism that John the Baptist had been describing when he preached to the crowds at the Jordan River.

And at the end of Luke's first volume, the Gospel of Luke, and the beginning of his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records Jesus telling his disciples that they will soon be clothed with power. Whatever that is, it must be related to this baptism of the Holy Spirit. So they, the twelve and others, including many women, are waiting. And praying.

The baptism happens on the Day of Pentecost, the Greek name given to the ancient Hebrew festival of Shavuot. Shavuot began as a festival celebrating the spring wheat harvest, then later became a remembrance of the Israelites receiving the Law of Moses. From ancient times it was

celebrated on the 50th day following the Day of Passover. In our Christian tradition it is celebrated seven weeks following Easter Day.

So the band of Christ-followers is gathered in this house, possibly including its courtyard, praying. Suddenly there is a tremendous sound, like the rush of a violent wind, Luke tells us, and it fills the house. Then what appears to be little flames, like fire, appear in and among them, and these flame-like things rest on each one of the believers gathered there.

And then each believer begins to speak in a foreign language, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke does not tell us so at this point, but I think the disciples, perhaps over 100 of them, then spill out of the house and into the street, because somehow they encounter devout Jews from all parts of the Mediterranean world, who hear them speaking in their native tongues. They recognize the ones speaking as being at least primarily Galileans, and they are amazed that they can speak these languages. Some of the witnesses think the disciples are simply drunk.

But Peter stands and delivers his first recorded sermon, relying heavily on the prophet Joel who predicted that the day would come when men and women, old and young, slaves and free would have the Spirit of God poured out on them, and they would see visions, dream dreams, and prophesy. That day, Peter preaches, has come. Joel also had predicted the calamities often associated with the Day of the Lord, had written that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD would be saved.

Peter makes a most remarkable theological assertion here, one that will be developed and expanded in the decades and centuries to come. Joel had written of the LORD God of Israel. Peter preaches the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth as that Lord. Indeed, in his testimony before the Jerusalem religious authorities a few days later, Peter tells them that there is salvation in no one other than Jesus, and that there is no other name by which people can be saved.

So what is it the Holy Spirit does on this particular Day of Pentecost, the one that has become so important in our Christian tradition? The Spirit gives the gathered disciples the ability to speak in languages that they had never studied. And why was that? Because it was time for the good news of life, hope, and joy in Jesus Christ to become a world-wide message, not contained in the region of Palestine, and not limited to the Jews. That message was now to go, in the words we studied last Sunday, "to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth."

And it was this little band of a hundred or so disciples who were going to get that evangelistic mission started. If we read to the end of chapter 2 in Acts, we find that some 3,000 new converts were added as a result of this very sermon that Peter preaches. The gospel, the good news, can no longer be contained. The Holy Spirit has burst its containing walls, like a dam, and the message of Christ is beginning to spill over the entire earth.

So that's one thing the Spirit does; it gives Christ-followers the power and the will to tell others about him. It's the same today, of course. I can imagine little tongues of flame resting on each one of you. Yes, even those of you for whom evangelism is more than a little scary. There is nothing you and I, and most importantly, we together cannot do when empowered by the Holy Spirit. You and I and we all together can do anything, including telling friends about Jesus, because the Spirit has been poured out on us, as well. And the expression of that power can be as simple as asking a friend to come with you to worship, or to one of our fellowship events, or to help with a rummage sale or another mission project.

As noted last week, we also are called to be witnesses to Christ, and furthermore, we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, poured out on us, to do that wonderful work.

Perhaps you've heard of a woman by the name of Corrie ten Boom. Corrie and her sister Betsie lived in the Netherlands when World War II broke out. They bravely hid Jews in their home to keep them safe from the Nazis, until finally one day the Gestapo beat on their door and arrested them for what they were doing. The two of them were then sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, where Betsie died, but miraculously Corrie survived and was eventually released. After the war, Corrie ten Boom began to travel the world, speaking about her experiences and how her faith made it possible for her to survive that horrible ordeal.

There is no doubt that Corrie was a very spiritual woman. Every day she spent a great deal of time praying and reading the Bible. But she realized that the ultimate goal of her spirituality was to be able to take her faith out onto the streets and to share it with others. And that's what she did.

At one point, in the midst of the Cold War era of the 1950s, Corrie ten Boom was in Moscow. Each day she walked through the streets of Moscow, trying to strike up conversations with Russian people and tell them about Jesus, but as soon as she would mention the name of Jesus, most of the Russians would immediately hurry off, fearful of what the Communist authorities might do to them if they found them talking about Christianity, which was officially outlawed in the old Soviet Union.

So one day when Corrie found a woman on the street who seemed to be quite interested in hearing about Jesus, she offered to have the woman go back with her to her hotel room, where they could speak in private. But right away the Russian woman said, "Oh, no. A tourist's hotel room is the worst possible place to speak about Jesus. Everyone knows that the authorities have hidden microphones planted in all the tourist's rooms."

When Corrie returned to her hotel room later that day, she decided to look for a hidden microphone. And sure enough, between her mattress and box springs of her bed she found it. At first, Corrie was annoyed that her privacy was being invaded like that, but then she decided to look at that microphone as an opportunity.

So for the remainder of her stay in Moscow every morning she knelt down next to that microphone and preached a five-minute sermon into it, praying that someone was listening and that someone's life might end up being changed.¹

You and I have a message to deliver. In fact, it's the most important, the most amazing, the most joyous message anyone can deliver, or anyone can hear. It is the news that this man, this crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth was God with and among us. That he willingly gave his life as the means by which our sins are purged. And more than that: his death was not final, but he was raised to life and lives still, awaiting the day that Joel foresees, when this Jesus will return to restore and heal all of creation.

That means that death is not final, that in spite of the darkness and seeming hopelessness of this world, the battle against evil and sin and despair has already been won. Thus we live in hope, loving others, within and outside the church, in word and in deed. And this new life is ours simply by trusting and following this Jesus of Nazareth.

It's the most important, the most amazing, the most joyful message anyone can ever hear, or that anyone can ever deliver. And the Holy Spirit empowers us, you and me, and all of us together, to see visions, to dream dreams, and yes, even to prophesy. To speak the good news to the ends of the earth, and in Cedar City. "Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

¹ Corrie ten Boom, *He Cares for You* [Carmel, NY, *Guideposts*, 1978], pp. 45-48.