



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Spirit for Our Time

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All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:4).

The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, as the Spirit comes in every time and place, to bring people together—to bring people closer to one another and closer to God, since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of God is love.

The book of Acts says that when the Spirit came over Jesus' disciples in a powerful way, they spoke in tongues. They talked in languages they didn't even know—which may sound strange, but that sort of thing still happens today, more often than we might think.

There were devout people in Jerusalem from many nations, and of course they spoke in their own languages. When they heard what was going on in the house where Pentecost broke out, some of them came to see what the fuss was about. Then another amazing thing happened. People heard foreign languages all around them, but they understood what was happening in their own native tongue. It's as if they wound up in a United Nations assembly with simultaneous translation, only they didn't need the headsets. The Holy Spirit himself did the translating.

Pentecost turns out to be like so many other events in the Bible: a special occasion where God does in spectacular ways the kinds of things God does more quietly all the time. Sometimes God acts dramatically to get people's attention, but that's mostly by way of reminding us that God is always

here, and always at work—especially when we’re inclined to forget.

So, for example, the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost and enables people to do things they can’t do by themselves. That’s part of the point of speaking in tongues. The Spirit helps us to do all sorts of things we can’t accomplish alone. St. Paul says that even prayer is like that. He tells the Romans, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” We don’t even know how to talk to God, but the Holy Spirit translates the inarticulate longings of our hearts, and speaks the still, small voice of God to us in return.

In fact, the very notion of doing things by ourselves, without God’s help, is an illusion anyway. It may be a flattering illusion, puffing ourselves up to imagine that all our accomplishments and all our possessions are the result of our efforts alone. But of course that’s nonsense. Every good thing in life, and life itself, is a gift from God. The very idea that we have or accomplish anything apart from God is just simple human vanity. We may be tempted to build self-esteem on the shifting sands of our resume, and feed our sense of entitlement by claiming that we deserve all we have and don’t owe anything to anyone. But from the perspective of heaven, where all the saints and angels know that God’s grace alone makes good things possible, our grasping sense of self-sufficiency appears clearly like the pitiful folly that it is.

So the Holy Spirit at Pentecost reminds us, first, that every human ability, and everything else we enjoy, comes as a gift from our gracious God. Then again, the Spirit at

Pentecost helps all kinds of people to communicate. The Holy Spirit enables people to *speak* in other tongues, but also to *listen* and to *hear*. People whose differences tend to divide them can suddenly understand one another—not because they all speak the same language, but because they can interpret what each other says in the language of their own hearts and minds.

The spirit of our own time, the *Zeitgeist* as the Germans call it, is fraught with division and divisiveness, a spirit of tribalism that's precisely the opposite of Pentecost. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God brings people together to listen and learn how to love, while the spirit of tribalism drives people further and further apart in fear and mutual hostility. At Pentecost people hear and understand one another, even when they speak different languages. At present, the tribalism so prominent in international affairs, in partisanship, and in our market-segmented media has people talking over one another, and shouting each other down, as if communication were a contest where the loudest voice always wins.

The spirit of Pentecost could hardly be more different from the divisive spirit of our time. But this is not a new thing. In the New Testament itself, Paul uses the metaphor of “flesh” for the spirit of this world when he says, “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: ... enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions ... and things like these.... By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

You can tell a spirit by the fruit that it bears, and the Bible tells us to test the spirits. People who are born of the Holy Spirit live by the Spirit of God, not by the spirit of this world. Then, as the prayer of St. Francis says, where there is hatred we try to sow love; where there is injury, we offer pardon; where there is darkness, we point in the direction of the light. We want to be instruments of God's peace because God has given us this ministry of reconciliation, where God is at work in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

Even at Pentecost there are some who sneer at all of this. "They're just drunk," the cynics sniff, prompting Peter's funny reply that the disciples can't be drunk, since it's only nine o'clock in the morning. There are always people who sneer, because cynicism is easy and cheap. To be faithful and compassionate is hard in a world of infidelity and self-centeredness. But that points to yet another quality that comes with Pentecost, which is courage. The Holy Spirit makes people brave because, once again, the Spirit of God is love, and "perfect love casts out fear."

The fearmongers and terrorists of this world appeal to people's baser instincts, but those who know the Spirit of God see that seduction for what it is. They don't need to be afraid because they know that their Redeemer lives, and God is good. If nothing can separate us from the love of God, then as the psalmist says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Back in the days when the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, free from slavery in Egypt but not yet safe in the Promised Land, somebody complained to

Moses that unauthorized men were prophesying, sharing the word of God, as though the Spirit had spoken to them. But Moses answered, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” Pentecost was a partial answer to Moses’s wish, when the Holy Spirit fell upon the first disciples, bringing people together, empowering them to do what they could not do alone, letting them listen to one another as they listened to God, overcoming their fears, and stretching their capacity to love beyond the boundaries of their own tribes and tongues.

Now let’s pray for the Holy Spirit to come over all of us, too, in our own time—since this world still desperately needs the Spirit of God, as it always has, and always will.



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