

*A Gift for Each One*

Lessons: John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-21

On the Day of Pentecost, something happened that had never happened before. I don't mean the wind and fire. God's Spirit had appeared in different ways by using nature, like the cloud by day and the column of fire at night to guide the Israelites in the wilderness journey. It was seen in the great poetic prophecies about solar eclipses and harvest moons. And wind was such a symbol for the presence of God that the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* mean air or wind, and both are also translated as "spirit."

What happens on Pentecost that was so different? Well, each person in the followers was touched by the fire. The flames were divided so that each and every one of the followers was gifted with the power of the Spirit to speak. Each person in the crowd heard the message that each of the followers was speaking. Every one of the people in the crowd, no matter their origin or language, understood what was being said.

We don't need to get deep into some theological analysis of the great mysteries of the faith to understand what happened that day. But we who have been through a lot of Pentecost Sundays – or to be more honest, we who have not lived in the Christian year in worship and have missed a lot of Pentecost Sundays – may have some ideas about Pentecost that we could never find in the passage.

The followers were not speaking in "spiritual tongues" like the church in Corinth was doing later. Our Pentecostal friends are named for their belief that "speaking in spiritual tongues" is Pentecostal, but the text must disappoint them. Pentecost is *not* the first example of "speaking in tongues" in the New Testament. Acts says the followers were speaking different foreign languages. The Spirit touched them with "fire-faith" to speak in a language that was not their own. The people heard, *and they did not need an interpreter.*

Marshall Harrell and I were in a worship service at the Presbytery Meeting this month, and congregations in the Presbytery of New Covenant were praising and proclaiming God in word and song – and even dancing in the aisles. To quote Marshall, "It was great!" We have congregations that speak Spanish and Korean and Chinese dialects and Ghanaian and other African tongues. Those worship services are wonderful experiences of the wideness of the world and the spread of the good news, but they are not examples of Pentecost. The followers were speaking languages that were foreign to them. The crowd heard the message in their own language. They understood the words. The real miracle came when some

understood that a Messiah who was foreign to their experience could save them and give them new life. The power of the good news carried by the wind of the Spirit was the real miracle.

Pentecost is the first example of simultaneous translation, and it worked better than the headphones at an international conference. The Spirit gave power to the followers to be the translators. The Spirit was poured out on the speakers and the hearers and overcame the limits to make the message clear enough to accept.

We are just common followers, but the Spirit can still use us to be translators in a different way. Pentecost may also come closer to our own experiences with different languages, and give us the gift of fire-faith to carry the message.

I have never had the chance to travel to a country where no one could understand what I was trying to say. The closest I have come was a couple of trips to Great Britain, where they reminded me on several occasions that I was speaking a foreign dialect.

But I remember a great experience of sitting in a Ivor's Acres of Clams, a landmark on Puget Sound in Seattle. I was alone that afternoon and looking out on the water, when I became aware of the people at the tables around me talking. Not one table was speaking English. I heard oriental and eastern European, German, and Spanish. But when the waiter came to the table and spoke English, they all managed to place their order. He did not know their language, but he wanted to help them. And one way or another he managed to put something on their table that they really wanted. The translating was a common effort in the attempts to speak and listen, and sooner or later the message got through.

Our Pentecost is like that. We are like the waiter. No, we aren't selling clams or Alaskan king crab. In fact, we are not selling anything. We have this simple message and gift we are giving away. We have good news that all of us know and anyone can understand if we just manage to connect to their language and life. In the conversation of speaking and listening, they come to understand what they really want, and we figure out how to give the gift in a way they can say "yes" to it.

Ironically, Peter's sermon was longer than you would tolerate in worship. Acts gives us just an outline. He used four texts from the prophets, not just the one you heard from Joel. Let me give you the Cliff Notes version:

The prophets dreamed of a day when the power and presence of God would come to all – when people would dream of the future God wants for them and they would speak to each other about God's promise.

Jesus came and made that future present. People heard God's message of justice and mercy and saw God's love in his actions. He was killed by religious enemies and political powers, and by the people who received his gifts and then abandoned him. But God did not abandon him. God raised Jesus from the dead, because it was impossible for the power of evil to defeat him. Jesus the crucified is not just the Messiah to the Jews; he is Lord to all.

Jesus has made known the way of life, and he makes those who trust full of gladness. The hope of Joel has become the good news: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

The miracle of Pentecost is that Peter spoke out of the limits of his own experience and history, but he spoke about what he knew Christ had done for him. He had experienced the forgiveness of God when he abandoned Jesus. He had seen the forgiveness of Christ when he tried to tell Christ what to do. He had watched countless acts of mercy to the outcasts and healing to the crippled. He had learned the lessons of a different way of living, and had seen that different life in action. He had experienced the miracle. He had called on Christ, and Christ had saved him – gifted him a new way of life and filled him with joy. And Peter wanted any and everyone to call on Christ, and receive the same gift.

Here is the obvious miracle of Pentecost:

The message is for everyone.

The message is that God loves everyone.

No, that isn't quite right. I'm not getting subtle or theological on you. But we miss the main point of this passage if we say it that way. It not about just "everyone."

Early in the week when I started stewing over the scripture lessons, I named the sermon "A Gift for Everyone." I really missed the point. That would be a good title for a sermon on the parable of the sower, throwing the seed everywhere and hoping some falls on good ground. When we hear "everyone," we think of crowds and collections and groups. We think of all of them, and we put them all together. That isn't the message of Pentecost. Peter didn't preach a sermon to everyone, and three thousand were saved.

The fire was divided and touched *each* one. The message was heard by *each* one in his or her own language. Pentecost was not about "everyone." Pentecost is about *each* one. At Pentecost, the Spirit gave power for each one to tell each one.

Here is the less obvious miracle of Pentecost:

The message is for each one.

The message is that God loves each one.

We can tell each one – any one – about the saving love we have received, and we can give that gift to each and any one.

We can trust that whatever words we try to use to talk about the way our lives have known the gift of Christ's love, the message will get through. We do not have to wait for the perfect moment or pray for the right words. We can share our faith in Christ with someone we know is looking for something. Look, Peter had been around Jesus for three years, but it was obvious he missed a few things. But 40 or so days after he tried to kill a soldier and he denied he knew Jesus in the night, look what Holy Spirit did through Peter. He preached a long and rambling sermon that a seminary professor would not grade better than a "C" and a congregation might say "what was he trying to say?" But he lived a new life that was the gift of Christ, and he wanted to give it away. So he shared it.

The miracle of Pentecost is that Holy Spirit is poured out everywhere and always working in each one of us to tell each one that Jesus loves me and you.

I was sitting at another table after skiing all day with some friends of a friend. They were a group who had skied together for years, and I was welcomed as a newcomer. We all spoke English, but most of these guys were from a spiritual foreign land. They may have gone to church as children or youth, but they never came back and their lives were not shaped by any thoughts of God that one might notice. They were what I call – without any judgment – "a bunch of heathens." Late in the evening the conversation turned from casual to personal, and one of the guys was admitting he was in his mid-life crisis. He had the toys and he had done lots of great things, but he felt like he was wandering around in the same circle and going nowhere. It got quiet, probably because he was saying what several were thinking. Then my friend who was their friend looked the guy straight in the eye and said, "You know what you need? You just need God in your life."

The Spirit of Pentecost is everywhere.

The message is for each one.

The message is that God loves each one.

Any one can ask God for the gift in any words from any life, and receive Christ's life-changing, world-changing, saving love.

With the Spirit's power, we can tell each one – any one – about the love we have received, and we can give that gift to each and any one.