

*“Empowering and Embracing Us”**Acts of the Apostles 2.1–19**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 8 June 03*

Okay, what’s the first thing that comes into your mind when I say the word, “Pentecost?” Say it out loud. “Pentecostal” is what I come up with. And what is the first thing you think of when you read this passage from the Acts of the Apostles which describes people speaking in different languages? Say it out loud. Speaking in tongues – glossolalia is the technical term – unintelligible speech, as Paul describes in the first letter to the church in Corinth. And if you’re like me, your experience may not include Pentecostalism or speaking in tongues, so what does this passage have to do with us?

The author of this book, a continuation of the gospel according to Luke, is not describing unintelligible speech: just the opposite! It isn’t a lack of understanding that the Spirit imparts, but rather a depth of understanding so profound as to enable the good news to be conveyed in ways that others “get it,” too.

When you heard members of the congregation stand up and read the scripture in different African and European languages, you may not have understood what they were saying. But think how thrilling it would be if you were a tourist from another country to hear your mother tongue spoken by strangers in a foreign land. You’d feel as though you were no longer an outsider – rather, you’d feel included and at home.

The gift of speaking to a person in their own language is a most profound way of saying, “You are welcome here,” which undergirds the ideas of Luther and of the Second Vatican Council in ensuring the use of vernacular language for scripture and for worship. For most of us, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew just don’t cut it anymore.

I wonder, though, if sometimes we in the church might as well be speaking in tongues as we try to reach out to people who have no faith tradition or background. Most of us probably grew up in the church, so we speak and understand the language of the church, but we still have plenty of our own jargon, whether we’re talking about paraments (the clothes draped over the altar, pulpit, and lectern) or apocalyptic eschatology (the study of the final period of history, which some see as ending in an apocalypse).

But, even in the way we “do” church, there are times when we do things that are not necessarily clear or obvious to newcomers. That’s the reason we print the words to the Lord’s Prayer in our bulletin each week: we want people to feel welcome and at home in this community of faith. One member of our congregation said that she really appreciated the way I try to define and flesh-out theological terms in my sermons; she said she felt like she was getting a part of my theological education. And the reason I do that is to try to include anyone who comes through our door by hopefully increasing their understanding of our faith.

One of the ways we try to break down barriers in our Open and Affirming statement is by stating that we welcome persons of every race and language. And of course, on the surface, that’s not quite right, since we don’t have simultaneous translation into Spanish or American Sign Language. But the intention behind the words is that we won’t let language be a barrier if we can help it.

One of the standard interpretations of this passage in the Acts of the Apostles is that it reverses the story of the Tower of Babel in the eleventh chapter of Genesis. You remember how it goes: the people who lived in that city lived and worked together and decided to build a tower so tall that they could look God squarely in the eye (thinking that God was up there somewhere, rather than in here and out there and everywhere).

And suddenly, miraculously, God punishes them for their hubris by making them unable to communicate with each other and scattering around the world, creating linguistic and geographic havoc. It's a neat primal narrative that explains how humanity peopled different parts of the planet and spoke different languages.

In our own time, think of the connections with this story: Islamic fundamentalists with a death wish attack what they perceive as an American tower of Babel and a symbol of commercial hubris: the World Trade Center. And then we turn around and decimate the ancient city of Babel in return. (You realize, of course, that Babel is Baghdad.)

Arthur Koestler, the Hungarian born British writer, once wrote that "Language promotes communication and understanding within the group, but it also accentuates the difference in traditions and beliefs between groups; it erects barriers between tribes, nations, regions, social classes. The Tower of Babel is an archetypal symbol of the process which turns the blessing into a curse and prevents man from reaching into the heaven. According to Margaret Mead, among the two million aborigines in New Guinea, 750 different languages are spoken in 750 villages which are at permanent war with one another."¹

So, now think of the story we heard from the Acts of the Apostles. The foreigners ask, "how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" The story brings people of all know races and nationalities **back together** and enables them to understand each other, effectively reversing the experience of the Tower of Babel. It's as if the Genesis account is the opening of a book and the Pentecost story is its final chapter. It's nice in theory, anyway, now it's up to us, with the power of the Spirit, to help bring that theory into practice. Yes, it's an ideal, and it needs to be our goal as a church in Ft. Collins and as the church universal.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, present that day as the early church gathered together, and present with us in this place today, **brings us together** with others. It draws us in, it **calls us** to community. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, means the assembly of those **called** together. And implicit in that is that we are called together by the Holy Spirit. It underscores the prayer Jesus offers for his followers in John's gospel, which was in last week's lectionary, and which forms the motto of the United Church of Christ: "that they may all be one."

Let's back up, though. I'm not doing a good job of defining terms. What the heck is the Holy Spirit, anyway? Most of us are pretty clear on God and Jesus, but things get a bit dodgy and vague when we start talking about the Holy Spirit, which is the least understood and least developed aspect of the Trinity.

One notion we should dispel is this notion of the Holy Ghost, which is a term that must have been designed to scare little kids. There's a line in a song by Jimmy Buffett that goes, "Vampires, mummies, and the Holy Ghost: these are the things that terrify me most."

Our word "spirit" comes from the Latin "*spiritus*," which correlates directly to the Greek word, "*pneuma*" and the Hebrew word, "*ruach*," all of which mean breath or wind. If you're breathing, you're alive. If the spirit dwells in you, you're alive. So, there is a connection not with some spooky, extraterrestrial being, but with a life force so close that its in your breast even as we speak.

One of my favorite translators of theological jargon is Frederick Buechner, a wise, wry, Presbyterian minister and author who lives atop a mountain in Vermont. Here is what he says about spirit:

¹ . Arthur Koestler in Günter Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, p. 85.

“Spirit is highly contagious. When people are very excited, very happy, very sad, you can catch it from them as easily as measles or a yawn. You can catch it from what they say or from what they do or just from what happens to the air of a room when they enter it without saying or doing anything. Groups have a spirit, as anybody can testify who has ever been caught up in the spirit of a football game, a political rally, or a lynch mob. Spirit can be good or bad, healing or destructive. Spirit can be transmitted across great distances of time and space. For better or worse, you can catch the spirit of people long dead (Saint Therese of Lisieux or the Marquis de Sade), of people whose faces you have never seen and whose languages you cannot speak.

“God also has a spirit—is Spirit, say the Apostle John (4:24). Thus God is the power of life itself, has breathed and continues to breathe himself into his creation. Inspires it. The spirit of God, [the] Holy Spirit...is highly contagious. When Peter and his friends were caught up in it in Jerusalem on Pentecost, everybody thought that they were drunk even though the sun wasn’t yet over the yardarm. They were.”²

So, Buechner says the Spirit is something you catch. But, I’d also say it’s something you have to listen for, to seek, to pay attention to. The Holy Spirit is often more subtle than the Lord God Sabaoth who runs roughshod over the priests of Ba’al or Jesus preaching and teaching on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. The Spirit is what ***lures us toward wholeness***, as individuals and as a people of faith who are gathered here.

For me, the experience of the Holy Spirit is an intimate experience that is based on relationship. And that relationship gets nurtured through spending time with God in prayer. A month ago, Jane Vennard, a friend, teacher, and UCC colleague, addressed the terrific Living Well class that John Henry Peck and Larry McCullough organized, and she recounted the story of Father Thomas Keating, who has done more than anyone to develop and popularize centering prayer. Keating said that he thinks of contemplative prayer as “a hot date with God.” I love that image of a Trappist monk in his 70s saying that.

And it’s that kind of experience that I think of when I envision the Holy Spirit. It often accompanies a long period of intentional prayer, which is our primary way of being in relationship – in intimate contact – with God.

I remember very clearly, over a year ago, when Jean and I first came out to Fort Collins to meet with the Search Committee. I had just been offered a job as a senior minister in a church in Rhode Island, and had put them on hold, explaining that I was visiting a church in the west. That Friday night, Jean and I met the committee at a potluck supper at Sherry and Don Bundy’s home, and everything just clicked and fell seamlessly into place. It was like falling in love. When we went back to the Holiday Inn, I had what I describe as a “ping” that told me this is the place. It’s one of the few times when I’ve had a palpable, bodily sensation in response to the movement of the Holy Spirit. So, we went back to Connecticut, I called the folks in Rhode Island and graciously declined their kind offer, and then proceeded to wait for four weeks while the Search Committee interviewed other candidates and deliberated.

The Spirit is the aspect of God’s personality that empowers and embraces us. What we need to do is to say “yes” to God’s invitation, and then enjoy a hot date with the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p.110.