

# “The Day of Pentecost: Subversive Diversity!”

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Date: June 10, 2018

## Scripture:

Acts 2:1- 18

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

## Sermon:

The English language dominates the world, perhaps not in sheer numbers (Mandarin has that one), but clearly in the areas of commerce, politics and pop culture. Everyone wants to or needs to learn English to get ahead, or to stay abreast of the latest fads in music and movies, or hopefully become a desired immigrant to the USA.

No matter where you go, it seems, you can run into someone who know at least a little bit of English. Of course, most of us Americans actually rely on this fact, that no matter where we might travel at least someone will be there to help us find a bathroom or get a ticket on the last plane out!

Distinct cultures have distinct languages. And even more importantly we are learning the fact that there is certainly a connection between cultural diversity and biological diversity.

And hopefully not too late, we are also learning that bio-diversity is critical to the survival of us all!

But empires seek conformity in culture, especially linguistically. And frankly it is far easier to control the rabble and to make lots of money and to exploit natural resources that we humans may happen upon.

A couple of Sundays ago I preached on the Tower of Babel. I suggested that rather than seeing the sudden multiplicity of languages as a curse, we should maybe see them as God's insurrectionary spirit of diversity at work.

Written during the time of Jewish captivity in Babylon, the oppressive nature of empire was a stark reality for "God's people." God, we were told, had created a world of incredible diversity, not for exploitation or domination but so that we all could rejoice in the wonder that had been wrought! Empires, on the other hand, are antithetical to the ways of God.

Now in Acts 2 the very same Spirit of God is turned loose again, blowing powerfully through another rag tag group of folks living under the cruel military occupation of the Roman empire.

To understand better what might be happening here it is important to reconstruct the scene. Many scholars think that the event we call Pentecost occurred toward the end of the 50-day Jewish Festival of Weeks.

Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Version* contemporizes the scene by saying that it happened on Thanksgiving Day in Atlanta.

Church tradition also believes the disciples are holed up in the same room where Jesus had recently appeared to them prior to his ascension.

Have they been there the whole time, still "cowering" behind closed doors, growing paler and more fearful each day?

Considering the fact that each is now a "co-conspirator" with a recently executed political dissenter, and add the fact that the occupying authorities have local informants everywhere, well yeah, they have good reasons staying out of sight.

And this, my friends, was the beginning of the movement  
we claim as our heritage!  
A darkened room of a couple dozen or so folks  
hiding in fear for their lives!

And I would add, God has them right where he wants them!  
Primed and ready for the Spirit to blow the roof right off the place.  
And I hope that this doesn't sound too arrogant, but it is rather similar  
to another "upper room" in Switzerland nearly 1500 years later  
when a similarly small group of folks, who would later be derisively  
called Anabaptist, kneeled down to perform adult baptisms?

But a "great wind" tears through that safe house,  
transforming those fearful fugitives into bold public witnesses!  
What began in secret and inside quickly spills  
boldly into the streets of Jerusalem.

Even if that room had been rather sizable for its day,  
it would not have been able to hold all of those folks  
who later claimed to hear the proclamation!

Would the now bold proclaimers have been returning to the places where  
their friend had been arrested, tried and executed only weeks before?

Myers puts it this way:

*"In other words, the church was forged by a remarkable act of coming out of the closet (as gays and lesbians would say), of breaking silence (as feminists would say), and of speaking inconvenient truth to power (as nonviolent resisters would say). We might think today of Latin American Mothers of the Disappeared or Palestinian Women in Black, refusing to cower before regimes of terror as they hold public vigil on behalf of victims of political violence. This is how the church was birthed and every time we muster the courage to bear the same kind of witness in the power of the Spirit, the church is born again!" (Myers p. 31)*

Now the list of, "devout Jews" suggests they came  
from the "four corners" of the known world.  
One also wonders if they were merely pilgrims or perhaps immigrants?

And for our present context here in Ft Collins I wonder,  
were they "good" homeless folks or "transients?"

In their own languages they heard clearly and directly  
the "powerful works of God!"

And of course the most powerful work of God would have been  
the creation of an abundant and diverse cosmos.

This multilingual event was evidently quite extraordinary  
since it is repeated three times in chapter two!

But why this need to use so many languages?  
After all, there was already at that time a lingua franca, Greek,  
that was the official language of the eastern half of the Roman empire.

And most likely someone in each group would have had the ability  
to translate for the rest, as often is the case these days,  
when foreign pilgrims in our own country seek assistance.

Or is the Spirit reaching beyond Roman law  
and perceived cultural conformity to welcome the alien?

Could some of the “great confusion” referred to here be similar to that which  
the architects of Babel experienced as the Spirit lead insurgents  
began plotting the empires demise using languages  
that the powerful could not understand?

But the crowd’s bewilderment also has a lot to do with who’s talking.  
For these cosmopolitan visitors are now being instructed  
by a bunch of uneducated rural hicks from Galilee.

Women were also part of that “upper room” group  
and Peter confirms their presence by calling attention  
to Hosea’s prophetic vision of inclusion that transcends  
not only gender but race, class and age.

And Myers adds:

*“This is not a portrait of polite, organizational rhetoric about multiculturalism, much less of corporate or state-sponsored “diversity training.” It is an in-your-face popular linguistic intifada amidst Roman occupation, declaring liberation from the underside in downtown Jerusalem.”*

Like wine, the Spirit is “poured out,” but in a humorous twist.  
Similar to vaudeville entertainers, Peter denies they are drunk  
(bada bing!), since it’s only 9 am (bada boom!).

But Peter goes on in what we did not read  
to strike at the heart of the matter,  
condemning the very authorities of empire for murdering Jesus.

It is the one whom they crucified who is “Lord and Messiah!”  
in an unvarnished attack not only on Ceasar’s claim to our allegiance,  
but to Rome’s brutal suppression of all messianic movements.  
Put more simply, our allegiance is to the executed  
and not to the executioner,  
it is to the weak and not to the powerful.

And like Jesus and John before him, this same careless rhetoric  
will land Peter in jail and bring about his own execution.

Underneath Peter's scathing criticism of the public order is the "embodied social alternative of a Spirit filled church."

Again, Myers says it so well,

*"By the end of Acts 2, the cringing little group of political refugees has been transformed into a dynamic community in which Genesis diversity and Shavuot economic redistribution are being "fulfilled." Bread is broken, the scriptures are studied and possessions are transformed back into the gifts that circulate around "to whoever had need." (Myers p. 34)*

Literarily, Luke's story of Acts, will affirm this multilingual insurgency as the Gospel indeed moves out from Jerusalem and to the "four corners of the world!"

It will be a message and an alternative community that we know was quickly adopted by social outcasts, especially the poor, women and slaves.

But Pentecost is more than a mere reversal of Babel, it is a key foundational strategy to tear down the pathological monolith of Imperial homogeneity using God's original idea of a community sharing his abundant diversity.

And Myers points out,

*"The gift of tongues communicates across linguistic differences without suppressing or eradication those differences. That is what distinguishes true gospel mission from cross-and-sword conquest in the service of empire that has characterized Christendom all too often. Unity through the Spirit does not mean monoculture, but the celebration of human variety."*

Pentecost is a challenge to the order of things both personal and political and of behaviors both inner as well as outer. The Spirit empowers those gathered to be "church" to "dance across the entrenched (and legally enforced) boundaries of gender, class, ethnicity and race."

The church is a movement that embraces, as John in Revelations put it, "every tribe and language and people and nation."

This pouring out is meant to disturb and to disrupt the institutions of power, by intentionally posing the question, "Who 'belongs' and who does not?"

From the beginning God's people are constantly being scattered, being greeted by as well as needing to welcome others who were different from themselves. And this great narrative of spreading and scattering is always subversive of those human empire builders who seek to consolidate and centralize culture and power.

Myers finishes his study of Acts 2,

*“God is always on the side of the excluded and outcast, the refugee and immigrant. The Spirit has busted out and busted up business as usual many times since Babel and Jerusalem, and she is waiting to do the same in our own time - if our tongues would but dare to loosen.”*

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