

First, the Spirit is enacting gifts in you; in each person here. There are all kinds of gifts given by the Spirit. No one needs to worry that they were left out of the gifts. Everyone is included.

Second, we Christians believe in do-overs. You may not get every big decision right the first time, or even the second or third. The disciples sure didn't. But we believe in forgiveness through Jesus Christ. We believe in God's grace given freely, which we do not earn, but simply receive. We believe in recognizing where our lives have gone wrong and turning them back toward God, toward the direction where that grace is coming from. Because we believe this, we do not have to be afraid.

And finally, we aren't working out our answers to these questions alone. The Spirit came to draw us together into a community of faith. The Spirit's gifts are given to the many members who are all part of one body. Our gifts are meant to be used in, with, and for the community. And often, we only realize we have the gifts at all, as we interact with the people in that community.

The tongues of fire came down at Pentecost. Languages abounded, many tongues were spoken. That same Spirit empowers us to speak those most basic words of faith: "Jesus is Lord." But not only to speak them with our tongues; also the Spirit allows us to live out what they mean. To proclaim those words with our lives, as we use the gifts we have graciously been given.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



May 19, 2024

Pentecost Sunday

*"Tongues to Proclaim Good News"*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Acts 2:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Pentecost is a big deal in the church! The way Christmas is about God coming to earth in Jesus, Pentecost is about Christ's enduring presence in the Holy Spirit. Pentecost comes fifty days after Easter, and it puts an exclamation point on the season focused on resurrection and new life. So us church people wear red and celebrate the official birthday of the church. But, as Presbyterian preacher Anna Carter Florence writes in her new book, *A is for Alabaster*, "Pentecost hasn't really caught on in the wider culture. It's not traditional family time, as in, 'So where are you celebrating Pentecost this year?...We don't gather in homes for big meals. We don't exchange presents or throw office parties. We don't set off fireworks, which would be festive and fitting. And what to cook? Some may have inherited a few treasured family recipes for Red Pentecost Cupcakes or Tongues of Flames Barbecue Sauce or even Mighty Wind Baked Beans, but if not, the magazines in the grocery store aren't exactly brimming with ideas."<sup>1</sup> Our world passes right by this holy day. But when it first happened, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost was a "great big noisy fuss, and a glorious one at that!"<sup>2</sup>

All that noise was coming from the blowing of the wind, but also from tongues, voices, languages, and speech. The disciples had been waiting for something to happen since Jesus ascended to be with God. They knew something was coming, but they weren't quite sure what. And when it finally happened, the wind blew in a great rush. Acts says there were divided tongues, as of fire, and a tongue rested on each of the disciples. Then the passage skips from the tongues of fire to other kinds of tongues. The people's literal tongues went into motion speaking all kinds of tongues. As in, they were all speaking a language other than their mother tongue. It was the Spirit that empowered their speech and allowed them to both speak and understand one another. This chaotic cacophony of languages and tongues was a clear reminder that the message of Christ was going to shake up the whole world. As Jesus had said, his message would go to

1 Anna Carter Florence, *A is for Alabaster: 52 reflections on the stories of scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 196.

2 Ibid.

3 Florence, 198.

4 "Gifting Spirit, Bible Notes, Enlivening the Gifts of God's Spirit," *Spill the Beans*, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, 2016, p.125

Judea and Samaria, to the very ends of the earth. The breath of the Spirit would not be limited to people who seemed worthy. The crowd, though, didn't want to believe this Spirit and this good news was for everyone. They dismissed the speakers of all the languages as mere "Galileans." As in, how could those backwater Galileans speak these elite languages so perfectly? Even though we know that the Spirit blows where it will, there are still those we would consider unworthy 'Galileans' today. As Carter Florence says, "[Is it] Southerners? Yankees? Midwesterners? Californians? Mississippians? Texans? Red necks? City folk? Foreigners? Immigrants? Racist[s]? Queer? [folk] Partisan[s]? Religious? Elites?"<sup>3</sup> The Spirit visits all people of every kind—even people like us!—and gifts them with the good news of Christ to proclaim in their own tongue and by their own deeds.

Which is what Paul described to the Corinthians as the Spirit was gathering those early Christians together. Paul told them that the Spirit had blessed their community with countless gifts. And it was that Spirit alone who drew them to trust, and to say out loud, that *Jesus* is Lord. Not the emperor, not the president, not anyone but Jesus. The Spirit was at work in their lives leading them to faith and then giving them gifts to live out that faith. All the gifts were different. But they all came from the Holy Spirit, who drew them into community together.

Sometimes we're asked to drill down on what those spiritual gifts actually are, for us. People have sold plenty of books and curricula to churches to help people name their particular gifts. Sometimes those tools are called a "spiritual gifts inventory" and churches hold workshops to help people figure out their specific gifts. And it can be a useful exercise. Other times we use a Time and Talents form to get at this idea; even our church asks new members to fill out something like that when they join, so we know what ministries they might enjoy getting involved in. They write on the sheet if they like to bake, or to teach children, or if they enjoy gardening or volunteering in the community. It's important and helpful. And it also feels a little mundane. It's something that any secular community could do, too: let us match *your* interests with *our* needs.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit surely do include the kind of things you can name and write down on a form. But the Spirit's gifts are something more than that, too. Spirit-given gifts may be ones that surprise us when other people notice them in us. These gifts may be ways we end up serving that we never expected to do. Or the gift may just be that the Spirit transforms our regular actions to make them more meaningful and purposeful than we thought possible. One commentary says it this way: "When we allow God's Spirit to direct and give energy to what we do with our body and

mind, character and personality, then our natural talents are infused with the energy of God, and the Holy Spirit directs our talent to the purposes of God's work in the world. When this happens, God, through us, can touch people with the full breadth of [God's] love. Spiritual gifts benefit the person who receives them and indirectly benefit others through what that person does with their life."<sup>4</sup> Spiritual gifts bless us and they bless others.

In a few minutes, we will take time to give thanks for graduating high school seniors in our congregation. This is a season when you get to be celebrated at home and at school. It's a moment that feels filled with relief and joy about all you've done to get to this point; and filled with promise and expectation about what will come next in your lives. It can also be a time of really intense wrestling with yourself—about what you're good at, what you want to spend your life doing and how that may feel. All the decisions feel really urgent and sometimes very daunting.

I would argue that you don't have to have clear answers to any of those questions today, or tomorrow or anytime soon. Yes, you may have to pick a major or get a job soon. You may face other big decisions in the coming years about your relationships, who you want to spend your life with, where you will make your home, how you will use or save or give the money that you earn. But these two passages, about the Holy Spirit at work and the spiritual gifts we receive, remind us that those decisions, important as they are, are not what ultimately shape our lives. It's the way we allow the Spirit to nurture us, the way the Spirit interacts with our talents and failures, the way we open ourselves to a community of people that proclaims what our life will be about. It's what our tongues say, what our hands live out, and how the Spirit is present in it that determines what our lives speak to the world.

Will the words in our mouths be ones that build others up and offer compassion? Will our tongues sing not only God's praises, but also share praise for and support for other people in our orbit? Will we raise our voices for those who are vulnerable and cannot find the justice they deserve?

Will we let the Spirit into our lives to shape our particular gifts not just for our own good, but for the common good? Will we allow the Spirit enough room in our hearts that we can sense a nudge here and there? Will we let the Spirit urge us to make a sacrifice, even a big one, that serves a larger purpose? Will we let God's Spirit reveal how parts of ourselves that we thought were deficiencies are actually surprising gifts?

Those are big questions, too. But they are questions you get to spend your lifetime answering and living into. And there is good news about them, too.