

**A Tale of Two Miracles**  
**A Sermon for the Day of Pentecost Day, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011**  
**Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23**

“Lord, speak to us, that we may speak / In living echoes of your tone; / As you have sought, so let us seek / Your straying children, lost and lone.”

Two wonders. Two miracles. Two gifts. All on a Jewish Pentecost of the spring harvest of wheat and barley, a celebration of the Law of Moses, when the Holy Spirit descended upon a lost, lonely, waiting group of people who began speaking in our many languages. And wonder of wonders, people began to understand each other and to speak to one another. And we who once were strangers are now one family in which the waters of baptism run thicker than the blood of cousins.

We are not here because we share the same political opinions or because we have similar suburban lifestyles. We are not here because the pigmentation of our skin is the same or because we speak a common language; in fact, we don't all speak the same language. And we are not here because we descended from European ancestors or because we have comparable values, incomes or educational training. We are here for only one reason: “Jesus Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father... that we too might live a new life.” And the new life that you and I share as the Church with an Ugandan or an Aghan, with a Brazilian or an Asian, with a Lybian or Iranian, who has partaken of the Lord's Supper earlier this morning than we, bears a deeper significance for our lives than the citizenship we share as a nation. “[For] you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God....,” writes the author of Ephesians.

Earlier Jesus told us a parable that compared the reign of God to a great banquet. The first of those invited to this feast had too many other things to do on Sunday mornings, things like buying oxen, and purchasing real estate, and getting a spouse. (We have lesser reasons on Sundays for skipping the great banquet.) So, in desperation the master of ceremonies goes out and invites anybody and everybody to the banquet, including the maimed, the lame, the blind, the poor, the failures, and all the other people who had never been invited to join the Olmstead Society, or the Riverside Golf Club, or even the Junior Women's League. He invites those strangers passing by on the sidewalks, and those on Harley-Davidson's heading west on 31<sup>st</sup> Street, and maybe even those you go to work with.

On Pentecost, that parable happens. Those who are inside can't help going outside, and those who are outside can't help coming inside. Pentecost happens when the risen “Jesus came and stood among the disciples and said, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” And that breath of the risen Jesus, breathed first upon his disciples, grew and grew until it was a mighty wind which God sent spinning through an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

There were only about a hundred twenty of them, Luke says, all moping around, ringing their hands, wondering what they were going to do without Jesus. And then they heard that holy hurricane headed their way, blowing through the entire house, striking sparks that burst into flames above them, filling up every last one with God's own breath of life. And those who were inside couldn't help going outside, and those who were outside couldn't help coming inside. Shy people had become bold. Scared people had become gutsy. Take a look at Peter. Lost people had found a sense of direction. People who had nothing to say, finally opened their mouths, and when they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. And when they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself was touching them. And nobody had an explanation for all this except that they had dared to breathe deeply of God's own breath of life on Pentecost. God was giving himself birth again into the body of humanity, not this time through Mary, the mother of Jesus, but this time through the Church, the mother of believers.

So, here at Pentecost, the Spirit *descends* to gather up all these different and diverse people, once confused and scattered at the Tower of Babel because of their proud *ascent* to God. *The first thing* this family does is to *hear* the call of the wind, a sound “from on high.” And the *second thing* this family does

is that they begin to *speak*, testifying to the great good that God was doing among them. God reaches down, that we may reach up. God speaks to us, that we may speak to him.

“Lord, speak to us, that we may speak / In living echoes of your tone; / As you have sought, so let us seek / Your straying children, lost and lone.”

This is church. We hear the Scriptures. We hear an interpretation of the Scriptures that we call a sermon. It’s one of the most difficult things for us as Americans living in a metropolitan area like Chicago to do—to sit down, to be still, and to listen.

Some of us say that we never hear God saying anything to us. But I’ve often thought that the problem is not that God does not speak to us but that we have distanced ourselves so far from God that we can no longer hear, or maybe we refuse to hear. We are bombarded by so many messages, so many words, so many sounds, so many signs, mostly in the form of advertising. We are caught in the crossfire of commercial warfare. So, is it any wonder that we don’t hear the living God speaking to us amid this ringing, relentless, constant cacophony of noisy idols? Yes, idols of our attention and our worship. Of course, going to church may seem to be nothing more than so much silliness if you’re not willing to sit here for a while in silence waiting for the wind to blow, to open your ears and your heart, to focus your thoughts and attention on something besides your self and all the noise.

Recently, columnist David Brooks challenged new college graduates to eschew the American obsession with self-fulfillment by looking beyond themselves. He notes that “If you sample some of the commencement addresses being broadcast on C-Span these days, you see that many graduates are told to: Follow *your* passion, chart *your own* course, march to the beat of *your own* drummer, follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*. This is the litany of expressive individualism,” he writes, “which is still the dominant note in American culture. “...Most successful young people,” he says, “don’t look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life. ...A relative suffers from Alzheimer’s and a young woman feels called to help cure that disease. A young man works under a miserable boss and must develop management skills so his department can function. Another young woman finds herself confronted by an opportunity she never thought of in a job category she never imagined. ...Most people don’t form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling.”

There is something about this God that loves to converse with human beings and to call them forth from the deadness of the self. But there is a second miracle here. Because God speaks to us, we can speak to God, and we can speak to others. For me, one of the greatest challenges of romance is finding just the right words to say to the other person. I remember a time on seminary internship, just before making a first date with a woman I had met at work (long before our marriage of twenty-five years this summer, of course), when I wrote out every word of the conversation before picking up the phone to call her! Imagine that.

It’s hard to find the right words because it’s hard to reveal ourselves, to say what we want to say and how we want to say it. So the Apostle Paul says that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, finds the words that we want to speak to God and to others even when we don’t have the words. And if I ever find the right words to say anything to your heart in a sermon, something that actually moves you out of your pew (and that seems to be easier for some of you than others) or even changes your facial expression, it’s not because I had good training or have been preaching for decades. I trust that it is because the Holy Spirit has chosen to speak.

And you. If you ever hear anything in a sermon that just might shape your life, just a little bit, even something you might think about later in the week or recount to someone else, despite all of the very good reasons why you might not hear, I trust it is because the Holy Spirit gave you the hearing.

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