

“Learning to Speak in Tongues”

Joel 2:26-32 – Acts 2:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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There was once a church on the town square in a small town. One night that church caught on fire and many of the people in the town came out to watch the fire department try to put out the fire. As he was standing there, one of the elders noticed a man that he had tried for years to get to come to church. So he walked over and said, “Fred, I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen you at church.” Fred answered him, “This is the first time I ever saw this church on fire.”

Today we’re celebrating one of the most important events in the history of the Christian Church, the day of Pentecost. This is the day we commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the early followers of Jesus. Pentecost is usually considered the birthday of the Christian church. Before that day, the followers of Jesus were meeting together but mostly in secret because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. But on that Day of Pentecost so long ago everything changed. The church was born and given the power to continue the work of Jesus all over the world. You could say the church was set on fire that day.

The word “Pentecost” is actually a Greek word that means “fifty days.” It comes from the Greek version of the Old Testament and it’s used to describe the second of the three major feasts or festivals in the Jewish year, called the “Festival of Weeks.” In ancient Israel, the Jewish people were expected to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate three feasts each year – Passover, celebrating their escape from Egypt, the Festival of Weeks fifty days later, celebrating the spring harvest, and the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, celebrating the fall harvest.

In Leviticus 23:16, God tells Moses, “You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the LORD.” God intended the Jewish Pentecost, or the Festival of Weeks, as a time for the people to bring their “first fruits” offerings to God. That’s why Acts says so many

people from all over the known world were in Jerusalem at the time.

Acts 2 tells us, “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

This morning I want us to think about what it means to speak in tongues. This idea of speaking in tongues has probably created more confusion in Christianity than almost any other. For some churches, speaking in tongues is considered the only proof of the Holy Spirit in your life, so there’s a strong pressure for people to “fake it ‘till you make it.” Their idea of speaking in tongues is really more like babbling. That’s not what we find in Scripture.

In the Bible, the word “tongues” always refers to languages and that’s exactly what we find here in Acts 2. When the Apostles began to speak in tongues, the people from all over the known world who were in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks were amazed to hear in their own languages. I think it’s probably hyperbole when Luke says that they were “from every nation under heaven.” But it’s pretty astonishing to look at where he says many of the people were from. The Parthians, Medes, and Elamites were ethnic groups from what is modern day Iran. Mesopotamia is today in Iraq and northeast Syria. Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, and Pamphylia are all in Turkey. Egypt and Libya are in North Africa, and Rome is of course in Italy.

It’s important for us to understand that the gifts the Holy Spirit gives are given to us for the benefit of other people and to build up the church. In 1 Corinthians 14, one of the only other places in the Bible where speaking in tongues is mentioned, the Apostle Paul

emphasizes that any manifestation of the Holy Spirit should be for the benefit of other people.

So on that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus' disciples, they began to speak. And as they spoke the people from the various countries heard and understood them in their own languages. They were being built up because of this gift of the Holy Spirit. God gave them the gift of speaking in tongues so that *more* people could hear and understand the gospel. The surprising thing here is that the good news of Jesus is for everyone. The message wasn't just for Jewish people. In fact, verse 11 says that it was for both Jews and proselytes, that is Gentiles that converted to Judaism. Then it mentions Cretans and Arabians. Cretans are the people who live on the island of Crete off the coast of Greece. In those days they were considered some of the worst people in the world. The island had been settled primarily by sailors. In particular, mercenary seaman. In Titus 1 Paul says, "One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true." And yet the Gospel is for them. And for the Arabs. It's for everyone and the Holy Spirit gives us the power to share that good news.

When the Kingdom of God broke into our world and the Holy Spirit was poured out on those people, it wasn't for their own personal benefit. God's plan was for them to be in community with each other and to work together to accomplish His work on earth of making disciples. That's still the purpose of the Church today. Whenever we gather to worship or to study or to serve, the Holy Spirit is filling us with His presence as well. Now, we don't always experience the rushing wind, or tongues of fire, or speaking in tongues. But maybe that's because we aren't expecting them. Maybe we aren't looking for the right signs today.

This got me thinking. What would speaking in tongues look like in America today where most people we come in contact with speak the same language? Or do we? One night a man was

pulled over for drunk driving and he tried to assault the police officer. In court the District Attorney was trying to prove that the defendant knew that the person he was assaulting was a police officer, and the best way to do that was to show that the officer was in uniform. So the DA put the officer on the witness stand and asked him, "when you pulled the defendant over, how were you attired?" The officer didn't quite understand what the DA meant so he asked him to repeat the question. So the District Attorney asked him again, "how were you attired when you pulled over the defendant?" It was clear to everyone *except the DA* that the officer didn't know what he meant by "attired." The attorney was irritated at this point and he asked him the same question a third time, "how were you attired when you pulled over the defendant?" This time, however, the light bulb went off in the officer's head and he proudly responded, "I was travelling on standard-issue radial tires."

These two men were both speaking English and yet they didn't understand each other. I think we find the same thing in the church today. In our society, we may all speak the same language, yet we don't understand each other. The question for us this morning is this: what are the "tongues" in which we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us to speak?

Instead of Spanish or Russian or French, perhaps the "tongues" we need to speak are the ones all around us. We need to be able to speak to people experiencing anger, loneliness, hunger, shame, or feeling unappreciated. As a church, maybe we need to learn to share the gospel with those who's language is busyness and success and money. We need to ask God to pour out His Spirit on us so that the way we live every day gives thanks to God but also builds up other people. The tongues we need to speak are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Perhaps one of the most important signs of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a Spirit-controlled tongue. Sometimes the tongue we need to learn to speak is being able to hold our tongue.

On that day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared in what looked like flames of fire. The people responded by giving control of their lives to God so He could use them and the result was that thousands joined the Church. The new church was on fire. Let me ask you this: are you willing to give God that kind of control in your life? Are you willing to let Him use you to speak in these various “tongues” to people who desperately need to hear about Jesus? God has poured out His Holy Spirit on each of you in

some unique way. As 1 Corinthians 12:7 says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” God has gifted you with certain spiritual gifts that He expects you to use to benefit others and build up His Kingdom. So if each of you will use those gifts then *we* will be a church on fire – not a fire that destroys but the fire of the Holy Spirit. That’s the real meaning of Pentecost.

Amen.