

“O For a Thousand Tongues!”

A meditation for Pentecost Sunday based on John 7:37-39, Acts 2:1-21

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Redlands United Church of Christ

Leif T. Lind

Happy Pentecost! And Happy Birthday to the Christian Church! Today, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate one of the great milestones of the Church, often considered the birth of the Christian Church.

I have called my sermon today, “O for a Thousand Tongues!” after the title of one of the great hymns of Charles Wesley, Methodism’s beloved hymn writer, appearing as Hymn No. 1 in most Methodist hymnals (No. 42 in ours). This song originally had 18 verses — *18!* Imagine singing them all!

“The Feast of the Fiftieth”:

Pentecost (meaning “fiftieth” i.e. the 50th day after Passover or Easter) is probably one of the least commercialized of the Christian holidays, or holydays. If we were to ask today, which do you think is the *least* important of the three great Christian festivals — Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost — I think most of us would hasten to exclaim, “Why Pentecost, of course!” Christmas and Easter have too many fond memories and sentimental attachments connected to them for us to give them up easily! Carols and candy-canes, chicks and chocolates — but Pentecost? What’s so special about Pentecost?

I like the way Rev. Fred Craddock describes it: “Without Pentecost, Easter reminds the church that Jesus has now gone to be with God and his followers are left alone in the world. Without Pentecost, Easter offers us a risen Christ whose return to glory leaves the church to face the world armed with nothing but fond memories of how it once was when Jesus was here. But with Pentecost, Easter’s Christ promises to return and has returned in the Holy Spirit as comforter, guide, teacher, reminder, and power. With Pentecost, the church does not simply celebrate but participates in Easter. *With Pentecost, the risen Christ says hello and not good-bye to the church.*”

In our imagination we see the first Christians gathered in the house, praying, singing, waiting and expecting the birth of the Christian Church. And all of a sudden, it says, there was a sound as of a “*violent wind*” (think hurricane perhaps), and tongues of fire as it were — hundreds of them — alighting on everyone’s head.

In scripture, wind and fire are both symbols of the presence and power of God. In scripture the same word is used for both “Spirit” and “wind”. This Spirit, or wind of God, was present as it

moved on the primordial waters of creation (Gen. 1). This wind revived and restored the discouraged and defeated men and women Ezekiel saw in his vision of the valley of dry bones. This wind or Spirit was the symbol Jesus spoke of when addressing Nicodemus on the need for rebirth. And it was through the image of fire that Moses first encountered the Divine Presence in the burning bush.

Babel undone:

“But wait — there’s more!” As the wind and tongues of fire swirl about the believers gathered in that house in Jerusalem, all of a sudden another noise is heard: the cacophony of men and women suddenly spouting out in numerous languages of the day.

Here we have a fascinating image: the reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), when God intentionally caused confusion by mixing up everyone’s language, causing instant chaos. Here at Pentecost, people begin to understand one another again as they speak each other’s language.

Since attendance at Pentecost was mandatory for any male Jew who lived near Jerusalem, and since the weather was more favorable in June, making travel easier, Jewish pilgrims had congregated from nearly all the then-known world for the Pentecost festival. Egyptians and Libyans, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs, not to mention natives of lands which no longer existed in those days — Parthia, Media, and Elam. It’s as if the author of Acts is saying, “Look, I know these nations no longer exist, but that’s exactly my point! The gift of God’s Spirit has come to all of humanity. *All are included; there are no exceptions.*” Some commentators have also pointed out that the gift of tongues or languages was probably not even necessary, as Jews of the Diaspora, as many of these pilgrims were, would all have spoken at least Greek or Aramaic, and would thus not have needed translation.

A birth takes place:

This gift of tongues would certainly impress the listeners that something very special was happening with these uneducated Galilean believers. God’s Spirit was in the process of transforming their lives. The Christian Church was being born.

The Feast of Pentecost, during the celebration of the wheat harvest, was a picture of the harvest of the Christian Church, the birth of the Christian Church when 3,000 were baptized after the delivery of the first sermon. And births, as all mothers (and some fathers) know, are rarely neat, tidy, or quiet. The Spirit was moving like a hurricane and like a wildfire. As with birth, the spectacle was neither quiet nor peaceful, but it certainly was thrilling and awe-inspiring.

The Church today:

Whether we see the liturgical symbolism of Pentecost through the traditional American red of birth and fire, the white commemorated in the British equivalent, Whitsun (“White Sunday”), or the green symbolizing the start of new life, we can all agree that it is the Spirit who is the agent empowering us with new fervor, purity, and spiritual growth.

But how do the images of wind, fire, and tongues apply to the Church today? How can we as individual church members learn from the united and unifying experiences of those early Christians?

The point of the Pentecost story, of course, is that the disciples didn't do a lot of talking. What they did do was a lot of listening and waiting in that house in Jerusalem. Waiting for the Spirit through fire and wind to speak through them.

The Spirit, after all, has a mind of its own, and decides for itself where and when it wishes to move. As the Gospel of John says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

And waiting as we all know, particularly in our culture, can be a very difficult thing to do!

The Spirit moves ... then and now:

As they surrendered to the moving of the Spirit, change occurred in each of their lives. The differences that had separated them just days before now suddenly evaporated and their disagreements now appeared inconsequential. In the disciples' day, as well as in ours, it is the working of the Spirit that is responsible for such changes.

People don't have to be from different nations or different cultures in order to need the Spirit to bring them together. Even differences in viewpoints, tastes, and temperaments can, and often do, lead to discord. Yet, by the unifying force of the Spirit these differences can foster, rather than dissolve, unity. As the writer of Ephesians states, through Christ and the Spirit, the breaking down of the "dividing wall of separation" and the creation of "one new humanity" has begun (ch. 2:14-15).

"In our differences unite us":

The early Church, prior to Pentecost, was no model of unity or uniformity: it was the outpouring of God's Spirit that brought unity to the early believers. I resonate here with the ideas expressed in Allen Pote's anthem "Many Gifts, One Spirit":

*Many gifts, one Spirit, many songs, one voice.
 Many reasons, one promise, many questions, one choice.
 O, God, we pray for unity, give guidance from above.
 In our differences unite us in the circle of your love.
 Take our many ways of working, blend the colors of each soul
 Into the beauty of a rainbow. Give us life, Lord, make us whole.*

It is true for us today, as it has always been, that it is our differences that may unite and bind us together, creating for us a sense of community. Imagine what a dreary world or church we

would have if we all had the same personality, all had the same ideas or goals, all thought the same way! How do we appreciate our differences and yet find that common ground?

In the United Church of Christ, we listen for a God who is still speaking. A God who may be speaking our language and our understanding — or who may be speaking the less familiar language of the Spirit.

Envisioning the kingdom of God on earth:

Those early believers were also part of a caring church, and they dreamed of a world in which the kingdom of God that Jesus preached had arrived would soon be fully realized. They envisioned a world that embraced the spirit of love and justice that Christ stood for.

Are we as Christians today satisfied with the status quo, either within the church or the world at our doorstep? Do we, like the early believers, dream of a church that does everything in its power to meet the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised? Do we today dream of a church that rejects the prejudice often shown through the forces of nationalism, racism, or sexism? Do we envision a church that is characterized by love within and without its walls?

Our hopes for change, either in the church or within society at large, will almost certainly not come easily or quickly. Sometimes we will make mistakes, and should not be discouraged. As one English teacher told her children, “You may make a mistake every day — just don’t make the same mistake!” Sometimes, too, we can expect that things will get “get worse before they get better”; that should not deter the Church from its mission. As Walter Brueggemann says, we ought “to stand free and hope-filled in a world gone fearful ... and to think, imagine, dream, envision a future that God will yet enact.”

O for a thousand tongues! Imagine what you and I could do if only we used every Spirit-led opportunity to speak up for those who have no voice, to heal the hurts of a broken world, to make a difference in the everyday world in which we move. Imagine if we could speak out and work against domestic violence to children and spouses, against human trafficking in all its forms, against discrimination of all types. Imagine the possibilities!

Then again, I suppose we really don’t need a thousand tongues. Properly used, one is quite sufficient.