

Pentecost

Text: Acts 2:1-21

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St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

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“The Conformation of Confirmation”

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Wouldn't that be awesome to see? Then again, I think it'd be pretty scary to see. We look at it as a heavenly encounter which began the Church as we know it. They probably thought they were in a Hurricane or a Tornado. Add to that, tongues of fire resting on their heads. Yep - more scary than awesome. And the Holy Spirit is probably the least understood aspect of the Trinity than the Father and the Son. There is a lot about the Holy Spirit that we can't understand.

There is a story about a little girl who lives across the street from a cemetery. She would often listen to ministers speak the words of committal at the close of funeral services. She decided to have a complete funeral service of her own in her backyard. She thought she would bury her teddy bear. After digging a grave, she solemnly lowered the toy bear into the ground, saying ever so seriously the words she thought she had heard the preachers say again and again in the burial service: "In the name of the Father and of the Son - and in the hole he goes!"

Not only does the Holy Spirit encounter confuse us, but the Pentecost event had everyone speaking in different languages. Two New Yorkers were driving in the state of Louisiana when they entered the town of Natchitoches. They immediately began discussing with one another how to pronounce the town's name. The discussion escalated into an argument and became rather heated. It was getting near lunchtime, so they decided to find a fast food restaurant. Standing at the counter, one of them decided to settle the argument before ordering. So he said to the person waiting on them: "Would you help settle a disagreement between us? Would you please pronounce where we are, very slowly and very clearly?" The man at the counter slowly said to the two men: "Burr-rrr-gerrrr Kinnnng."

Not knowing the language can be a problem. I remember a story about the college graduate who was taking the summer off to "unwind" by traveling through Europe on a Eurail pass. One night, in northern Italy, he wakes up to find the train stopped and a red light flashing frantically in his compartment. He can't read enough Italian to translate the words under the light, but the urgency of the flashing coupled with the suddenness of the stopping lead him to the only obvious conclusion - the train is on fire. Springing to his feet, he throws on his pants, grabs his knapsack, fumbles with the door latch, and lunges into the corridor.

Looking down to the end of the car, he screams at the conductor: "Do you speak English?" "What's wrong?" the conductor cries (in perfect English). "The light ... the red light...the flashing red light ... with the words under it I can't read (because they're printed in Italian). What do they say?" "Ah," says the conductor. "They say when the train is stopped, please do not use the toilets."

Yes, it helps to have an interpreter when we don't understand what is being said. Pentecost, the birth of the Church, an event that has a lot we don't understand. This can lead us to wonder where the church of Jesus Christ is these days. On fire? In motion? In the toilet? Stopped dead in its tracks? So where are we? Obviously, we are here rooted in the present, grounded in the moment, located in time. Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania, May 31st 2009, St. Peter's Lutheran Church. Less obvious is our location, our liturgical location, our ceremonial location, which is that wonderful, colorful, incomprehensible experience known as Pentecost. Jerusalem, 29 A.D., nine o'clock in the morning. This is why we have so much red. Because, once upon a time, a group of people felt themselves to be "on fire." And, apart from the question of whether or not we can be like them, we have the intuitive good sense to know that we should never forget them.

What we have is a room full of people all fired up, talking at the same time, in a cacophony of languages. Some who heard it called it "babble." But others, taking time to sort out words and phrases, said: "I recognize that language. It is the language spoken by the people in my native country." And other languages became similarly recognized, to the degree that what was experienced was equivalent to a United Nations town meeting, taking place without benefit of interpreters or headphones. But this posed an obvious question. Where did these men learn these languages, given that they were all residents (and natives, for the most part) of Galilee? No one seemed to know or be able to explain it. Which prompted scoffers to say: "Pay no attention to these men. You will find what is in them, once you check the wine supply." But Peter countered with a pair of arguments. First, he said, these men can't be drunk because it is still early in the morning ... meaning that they haven't been up that long to get that drunk. Second, if they are drunk, it is more God's doing more than the barkeep's. For what is in them is not spirits, but THE Spirit ... not whiskey, but wind ... not bourbon, but breath ... not Galliano, but God. And either Peter was sufficiently convincing or the Holy Spirit was not yet done for the day because, before the sun called it quits in the west, 3,000 bystanders approached the disciples, saying: "Tell us what we need to do to get what you guys seem to have."

This is why we associate, to this very day, the initial stirrings of the Christian movement with whatever it was that happened that fiery Pentecost morning in Jerusalem. One thing that happened at that first Pentecost event when everyone was speaking in different languages was that everyone could understand the languages. Today we need interpreters. If people are going to feel comfortable in the Church they need to have interpreters. Although traveling to a foreign country can be an exciting thing, it can also be very lonely. Thousands of people are all around you speaking and conversing with each other, and you have no idea what they are saying

because they are speaking in a foreign language and you do not have an interpreter. Two weeks ago there was a delegation visiting from the Silesian Synod of the Augsburg Confession of the Czechoslovakian Republic visiting our Synod. I was on the committee to help host them. When we were having meetings I kept hearing this annoying murmuring in the background and wondering who was talking while the presenter was speaking. Then I realized that it was an interpreter repeating everything in Czech that they were hearing in English. That way the Assistant to their Bishop could be included.

The Pentecost Event was an example of how God meant the Church to be. People from various places, cultures and lifestyles, all speaking in different languages, but all being able to understand God's message. That's our job today. We are to be God's interpreters. We are to tell and show how God intended the Church to be. We need to be open to receiving the Holy Spirit and allowing the Spirit to set us on fire!

Just think of what we could do if we allowed the Spirit to work through us as it did on that Pentecost day when 3,000 people responded. Today we are Confirming seven young people into the adult membership of the Church. That's only 2,993 shy of the Pentecost number, but it's a start. In a way, Confirmation is a ConFORmation, they are saying that they are conforming their lives to live according to God's purpose for them.

I would like to be able to hold up the rest of you as an example for them to follow. I would like to hold up your example of Tithing. Tithing? Your Offerings! Tithing is where the Bible says you should give 10% of everything you have back to God for the Church's work. Confirmands - not many of them do that. They'd LIKE to - but they just don't feel the Fire of the Spirit yet, to excite them enough about God's ministry to give 10%. They've lost that Fire - the Fire that I'm SURE you are feeling this morning. But the Spirit is still at work on this. I'm looking to you to set an example for them as to how a truly faithful Christian would give to God.

Worship attendance. Now there is an area where I would like to hold them up as an example. You know that on Christmas and Easter we have to add additional services to accommodate all the people who come to worship and praise God. If the members of this church would allow the Spirit in to inspire them the way the Pentecost people did, we would be adding additional services every week. Confirmands - I'm sure as you Conform your life to the Will of the Spirit, I'll be seeing each one of you every week at worship - isn't that Right?!?

The Sacrament of Holy Communion. Now there is a place where the congregation should be able to set an example of faith. Being present to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, given for the FORGIVENESS OF OUR SIN. Who would miss out on THAT? And yet, each year there are a list of people that are at risk of being placed on the inactive list for not communion at all during the entire year.

Confirmands - I need you to help rekindle the Fire of the Spirit within this congregation. I know they can make it difficult sometimes. I'm sure you're holding back your enthusiasm. But LET IT LOOSE - let the Spirit work within you. Hopefully we have inspired you in your

faith to get you to this point of your Confirmation. Now we need you to inspire us to become excited once again by our faith.

It is our job to be interpreters. We need to interpret this foreign Church language, a language that talks about Absolution, Repentance, Grace, Salvation, Evangelism, all of these foreign words that people outside the Church have a difficult time understanding. We need to interpret it into a language they can understand. Instead of all the technical terms, they simply need to hear about God's forgiveness and love. That is what we are here to do. The Holy Spirit is burning within this place. We just need to open our hearts and allow it to burn within each one of us. That is what makes it possible for us to share the life, love and joy of Jesus Christ with others. Amen