

Tongues, Ears, or Too Much to Drink

Acts 2:1-21

Let's start by setting things straight -this passage has nothing to do with "speaking in tongues"—that is, an unknown prayer language, a mystical speaking in spiritual syllables and sounds. This passage about the day of Pentecost is all about the proclamation of the Word to those gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost.

Penta, meaning fifty, was the festival fifty days after Passover, Passover being the festival of the giving of the Torah, the festival of the grain harvest, the festival of "First Fruits". And the city was packed with pilgrims from "*every nation under heaven.*"

And on that day, the power of God's Spirit enabled the disciples to proclaim the Gospel in words people could understand and in ways that cut across culture, tradition and nationality. It was literally the festival of "First Fruits" for the Gospel of Christ.

Pentecost is all about the ability to relate to others, to cross racial barriers, to bridge the ethnic divide, to make the Word of Christ known in the words of the world's people.

And we're still about that business today...trying to speak the tongues of technology, to communicate the timeless Word in real time, to speak so people can understand.

A guy named Tom Ehrich visited pastors in Houston, where bigger is better and mega-churches abound. In this gathering pastors from smaller churches were lamenting their modest size and the demise of their denominations, and Ehrich asked, "Do you know what happened in 1964?"

They responded: the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, Vietnam, Martin Luther King, the Ford Mustang—all actual events. But then he told them that the most important event of that year for the church was that postwar baby boomers began to graduate from high school, and many of their parents lost their main reason for going to church.

He says we went a decade without even realizing what had happened, then two decades blaming ourselves.

Meanwhile (he says), we clung to facilities and methods which worked in the '50s but increasingly became outmoded and burdensome. Think corner drugstore, corner hardware, neighborhood movie theater then as opposed to CVS, Home Depot and NetFlix now.

He says we can criticize the mega-church, but one of the things they do well is analyze their market, focus their message, and they go where the people are. And he concludes by saying: "We need to be as responsive to market preferences as any business. The world is largely unchurched. There's no shortage of people seeking God. The question is, "Are they getting the message?"

If we're going to reach others with the Gospel today, we need to speak in tongues. And by that I mean the language of technology, the tongues of the world, sharing the Word in ways people can understand. We need to speak in tongues.

Because in our lesson today, when they did, Luke says: ... a great multitude came together, and they were bewildered because they heard them speaking in their own languages.

Now I wonder, **was it a miracle of tongues or of ears**... of speaking, or of hearing? Of experiencing the Gospel in their own lives, their own culture, their own tradition, their own language?

In our lesson Luke reports that the multitude were amazed and wondering, saying, "Are not all of these who are speaking Galileans? And how is that we hear, each in his own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontas, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Cretans, Arabians, we hear them talking in our own languages the mighty works of God."

What a vision, what a promise for the people of God. And what a sad commentary on us today, because tragically we aren't there yet. Race and language still divide us. Mistrust and distrust and demonizing those who differ from us can be heard from every corner of the globe.

We seem to be more divided over religion, ethnicity, nationality. And in this day, the world desperately needs to hear a word from a church which honors diversity and tries to create a new community where all can hear in their own experience.

Tongues to speak. Ears to hear. **Or too much to drink?** That was the assumption of the folks on the street—"These guys have had too much to drink"—to the point that Peter had to address it directly in his sermon, "These men are not drunk as you suppose, since it's only nine in the morning."

Now I'm not advocating public drunkenness or rowdy worship. Heaven knows we're Presbyterian. But I wonder: what if the world, looking in on our life together, was befuddled by how joyous and loving and excited we were, and the only way they could explain it was to say, "They must be out of their minds!"

What if our openness to others, our commitment to inclusivity, our respect for those who differ from us, was such that there was just no other way to understand it? What if our love for our enemies, our compassion for the world, was just too much to explain any other way than to say, "They must be filled with new wine."

Unfortunately, in a day and world like ours which is so polarized, anyone who hopes for brotherhood among Christians, Jews and Muslims must have had too much to drink. Anyone who advocates for peace in the face of raging violence in the Middle East is at best unrealistic or at worst unpatriotic. Anyone who thinks we can bridge the racial divide in this country must be out of their mind.

But that's exactly what happened in our text this morning. Luke says, it was when they were "...all together in one accord, in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven, like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting."

A northerner made his first trip south of the Mason-Dixon Line driving from Chicago to Georgia. On his first morning in the South he went into a restaurant to order breakfast and noticed that every dish included something called grits...which some would say is exactly the way God intended it.

Not being familiar with this southern delicacy, he asked the waitress, "Could you tell me, exactly what is a grit?" Looking down on him with a mixture of compassion and condescension, and said, "Sugar, you can't get just one grit. They always come together."

Which is exactly what needs to happen if we expect the Spirit to descend upon us – we all need to be in one accord, in one place.

That's not to say that we should minimize the importance of personal prayer and devotion, the need to spend time alone with God, both of which are central to our spiritual journey. And to be sure, we each need to find our own personal relationship with Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior.

But that can never take the place of the family of God, the Body of Christ. And for most of us, most of the time, we experience the Spirit of Christ most often when two or three are gathered together in his name, in community, in this church.

This past year has been shocking, and confusing, and difficult, and depressing, and lonely. And Zoom has been a blessing when it worked and a curse when it hasn't. It allowed us to worship together while being apart, and to maintain some sense of community in the midst of isolation.

But it's time to come home. It's time to come back to worship in person. So that when we pass each other in the halls, we can greet each other and smile. We can regain the kinship we yearn for, that sense of holy family. Bruce Larson says, "The ultimate gift of the Spirit is the church itself, when the Spirit gave us to each other."ⁱ

Like grits, you can't get just one. Pentecost happens together. And the Spirit comes with the gift of tongues, speaking the Word of God so others will understand; the Spirit comes with the gift of ears, all hearing in their own experience. So that all might find it...together.

May it be so. Even here. Even now. Even tomorrow. Amen.

ⁱ Bruce Larson, *Wind and Fire*, page 39