

## **Acts 2: 1-13**

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 a tongue 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

**“The Flat Earth Society”  
Rev. Charles Schuster  
May 31, 2009**

Sometimes, when you aren't sure where to take a sermon, you know where it begins, and you begin with some kind of story or some kind of opening, you tell it and it just goes. But sometimes, you know where the sermon's going, but you don't know how to get it started. That was true of this one. I knew where the sermon was moving, it has a life of its own, and I knew where it wanted to be, but I didn't know how to get it started. And then I got a call. Not from God, although.... And it wasn't a calm voice. It was the voice of panic. You wouldn't believe what happened here at the church yesterday. I'm at home, working on this sermon, on Pentecost, and the phone rings, and it's nine o'clock, it's actually 9:15, and the custodian hasn't shown up, we're going to talk about that, to unlock the building, and there was a funeral here yesterday. Most of these flowers, I think, are from that.... and the Eastern Star wanted to get in to practice their skit.... ritual (I heard the muttering in the choir, so I wanted to repair that.) They think I can't hear them. And the garden people were here, and they wanted in so they could put the geraniums, which have been here all winter in potted plants of dirt, outside near the south entrance where they belong, it's time. And the Kids' Closet people wanted in, to distribute children's clothing to children who didn't have enough to wear, and the library people, y'all were wanting in so you could glue down those footprints that go to the library and other arrangements made for the celebration today, the trustees probably want to talk to you about those things that are on the floor there... and the people who were doing the reception for the funeral wanted in to make punch and to cut those little bread things square for the chicken salad. I unlocked the door and turned all these people loose, and they set off the burglar alarm. You wouldn't believe what happened at the church yesterday when I was working on the sermon on Pentecost.

Last year on Pentecost Sunday, we had the fire drill, remember that? And had to evacuate the building? I think it was on Pentecost, and the battery on the bullhorn had run out of power, and we had to yell at people instead of using the bullhorn, and the Youth had the cookie sale in the parking lot at Pentecost. You wouldn't believe what happened at the church on Pentecost, it's always been that way. Pentecost is said to be the biggest day of the year for the church, and Ray's absolutely right, it's huge. It's something like that in Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles. It's a big event.

Thomas Long is a preacher, and he teaches homiletics (or preaching) at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Thomas Long, he's doing a children's sermon, like I just did, and he's trying to explain Pentecost to the children. Actually, he's trying to explain the whole church year, and he's talking about Easter and Lent and, just like Ray did, he's talking about Christmas and Advent, he's talking about Epiphany, and he's talking about Pentecost. He said, Pentecost is the Sunday we celebrate when the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples, and there were tongues of fire, and a great big storm, and a dove descended, and people were speaking in different languages all at the same time. One of the little children raised her hand and said, "Gosh, Reverend Long, I think I must have missed that Sunday."

Pentecost, you wouldn't believe what happened. Some thought the people were drunk. Something happened at the church. Some don't believe what happened, some have missed what happened at the church, and Acts is the only place in the Bible that refers to it, to describe what happened, the birth of the church after Jesus' death on the cross, after the disciples saw the risen Christ, after Jesus ascended and sat at the right hand of God. The Ascension, we talked about that last week. Now there's Pentecost, and we don't want to miss it, but you won't believe what happened. It's hard to believe it. But let's look.

Pentecost is the power of the positive. Michael Yaconelli once wrote, "The grace of God says to you and me, 'I, God, can make last place more significant than first place. I can take people who persecute the church, and make them pillars of the church. I can take the dead and give them life.'" God's grace does not exist to make us successful. God's grace exists to point people to love like no other they've ever known. Pentecost was present. You'll never believe what happened in the church. The power of the positive. Pentecost itself was a Jewish holiday. It's a thanksgiving feast, it's fifty days after Passover, giving thanks for the harvest. And the disciples came together to give thanks. They had little reason to be thankful. Three years of their lives, in a sense, wasted. Their leader arrested, tried, put to death. The future for them in doubt. They could have come together to gripe. Nothing more unifying than a meeting of malcontents in the throes of their malcontention. Barbara Brown Taylor calls this "oppositional identity." She writes, "Nothing strengthens a community like a common enemy." The disciples certainly had common enemies, but that's not what brought them together. They didn't come together to gripe, they came together for gratitude.

James Moore tells a story of a young cowboy who was short and slight and with a voice high-pitched, and he came into a saloon and he shouted, "Somebody painted my horse

green, and I want to know who did it.” And a huge guy, six foot ten inches, 280 pounds, nothing but size and muscle, stood up and said, “I did it. What of it?” And the young cowpoke deepened his voice and lowered his head and said, “Well, I just wanted to thank you. And I wanted you to know that the first coat of paint is now dry, and we’re ready for the second.” Misery loves company, but Pentecost happened when people gathered to be thankful, even when their horses were painted green. They could have come to gripe, but instead they came for gratitude. Misery loves company, but gladness leads to greatness, and bitterness doesn’t make us better. Thinking about our burdens overlooks our blessings. It was in a Cleveland newspaper, (thanks, Helen - Helen here sent it to me) Regina Brett, she’s ninety (not Helen). This is what life has taught her. “Life isn’t fair but it’s still good. Life is too short to waste hating anyone. Make peace with your past so it won’t screw up your present. It’s never too late to have a happy childhood. The second one is up to you and no one else. Forgive everyone anything. Believe in miracles. No matter how you feel, get up, dress up, and show up.” And then, “When it comes to chocolate, resistance is futile.”

What an attitude. Hard to imagine what brought the disciples together, but it was gratitude, a spirit of gratefulness, Pentecost, the birth of the church. Misery loves company, but gratitude leads to greatness. It happened, the church was born. The Holy Spirit came. That’s what brought them there. Look what sent them out. It was the sound of a mighty wind, and tongues of fire. The sound of a mighty wind. Storms can be frightening, but they can also be inspiring. The mighty wind can make us bold, chosen, or can make us cold, frozen. Either way. Pentecost took a crisis and made it creative. A creative spirit was present. It was Thomas Edison who wrote, “We don’t know what water is. We don’t know what light is. We don’t know what gravitation is, we don’t now what electricity is, we don’t know what heat is. We don’t know a millionth part of one percent of anything, but that does not let our ignorance of these things deprive us from their use.” We look at the future. We feel the wind. The spirit is present. We use the creative spirit.

Ezekiel found himself in the middle of a storm. Others were afraid. He wasn’t. He heard in the storm the sound of God. Ezekiel became a prophet. He spoke to the people words he heard. The rush of the mighty wind. The mighty wind of change is a force we often resist, but there is creativity in the wind. The movement of the spirit. If we use it right, it we steer it where it will let it go, the creative spirit, the Holy Spirit, will take us where we’ve never been. Thomas Friedman hears the mighty wind. His writing, I think helps us deal with the changes in the world, and he sees the creative spirit. Technology means that we have access to the world, and the future is hopeful, if we use it right. And in his book, *The World is Flat*, he says, “No longer are we separated from each other, and our borders have become invisible because of the Internet.” And he writes, “The greatest day in recent history is 11/9.” 11/9, that’s the day the Berlin Wall came down. And when the Berlin Wall came down, it was the result of creative energy and the human spirit that said, “We will not be divided.” 9/11, on the other hand, he says, “has pushed the world back into a stage of fear and suspicion, and Friedman hears the sound of the mighty wind, of 11/9, the Berlin Wall coming down. People will dare to imagine a more open world

where every human being is free to realize their own potential, and will find the courage to act on that.

Karen Linamen lives in Colorado Springs, and she's written a book entitled *Due to Rising Energy Costs, The Light at the End of the Tunnel Has Been Turned Off*. It's an interesting book about how to have a happy life when the circumstances are dim. Chapters of the book are interesting. One of the chapters, "When I Feel Blue, I Start Breathing Again." Another chapter: "Help, I'm Talking and I Can't Shut Up." My favorite chapter: "Never Take a Laxative and a Sleeping Pill on the Same Night." The book is humorous, but it's also serious. It's about how to look for the best in things that are the worst, and how to tap the creative spirit. It's about believing in the creativity that's around us, and she writes, "You and I got places to go, things to do, people to love, live to live, dances to dance. The bad news is that sometimes, skies are gray. The good news is, you and I don't run on solar power." Bruce Barton was right when he wrote, "All splendid things happen because there are those who dare to believe that something inside of them was bigger than the circumstances outside" There is a mighty wind blowing. There are creative things for us to do.

A young couple came by the church a week ago. They had gotten married last summer, up in Steamboat Springs. Their wedding was outside in a field, and it was windy and stormy that day, but the storm subsided, and the wedding was perfect, and then they went inside into a lodge. They showed me their wedding pictures. There's this picture, they're sitting behind a table. The food's on the table, there's a great big picture window behind them, and in that window, you see, they caught it on film, a bolt of lightning that came down in the shape of a Y. A mighty wind blowing, a spirit moving, a bolt of lightning, the letter Y, saying to us, "Yes," saying to them, "Yes," saying to all of us, "Yes" to today and yes to tomorrow, yes to cures, to illnesses, cures that have not been found, they will find them. Yes to solutions, to problems still unsolved, we will solve them. Yes to the unknown with its challenges. It will bring possibility. The future calls. It says "Yes."

Pentecost happened. The spirit blew, the tongues of fire, walls came down. The earth is flat. What brought them there? Gratitude. What sent them out? Creativity. Gratitude got them there, the creative spirit led them out, but look at how they went. Each spoke in their own language, each presented themselves in their own bias, each expressed themselves in their own culture, their own peculiarities, their own annoying habits, their own shortsightedness, their own weirdness. They appeared, and they were themselves, just as they were, but they understood each other. People are strange. Not any of us. But people are strange, don't you think? I mean, there was Adam, and he was odd. And then there was Eve. My goodness, they deserve each other. Sarah was strange. She named her son Isaac, because that means "laughter." She laughed when they told her she was pregnant. People are different.

Once I was at a meeting in Washington DC, sat beside the president of Drew Seminary. Leonard Sweet was at the meeting, and he had his hair roached up and he was wearing a cape, and I leaned over to him and I said, "Elvis, right? You're trying to look like Elvis Presley." And he said, "You know, no one else even noticed, and today is Elvis's

birthday.” Weird. It’s the way we talk. It’s the things we say. There was an important moment that happened in the Men’s Retreat, when we met in a barn, two weekends ago. Sixteen of us. Bishop Wilke, our leader, Richard Wilke has always been, will always be evangelical conservative. That’s who he is. He’s talking to us about how important it is to share Jesus Christ with people who don’t know Jesus. A couple of the men in the group said they are uncomfortable using that language. The only way they can share their faith is to speak of the meaning they have received from the idea that there is good in the world, God in the world, and for them they found it in the Gospel. That was the point in the day when the sharing became real, when we learned we could talk to each other in our own language, and yet could be understood. The spirit was present.

Annie Dillard wrote, “We were made and set here to give voice to our astonishment.” And we each are going to give that voice in a different way, and we understand, when the spirit’s there, it’s Pentecost. Krista Tippett said in her book - and Krista Tippett will be here in November - *Speaking of Faith*, she said, “My head is full of many voices, elegant, wise, strange, full of dignity and grief and hope and grace. Together we find illuminating, edifying words and send them out to embolden work and clarify healing. We speak because we have questions, not just answers, and our questions cleanse our answers and enliven the world.” People speak in their own language, and yet they’re understood when the spirit is present. Most of the time, the words are not as important as the emotions that are behind them. If you ever have someone who seems angry and bent on putting you down, if you listen beyond the words, you will hear fear. If you’re ever around someone who continues to boast and brag about their accomplishment, if you listen to the passion and not the prose, you will hear insecurity and you will understand. If you are ever faced with someone whose faith seems so strong that there is a need to convert you, if you listen to the Holy Spirit that is behind their Holy Scriptures, you will hear more doubt behind the words than faith, and you will understand.”

Jack Handley once said, “If I was being executed by injection, I’d clean up my cell, and when they came to get me, I’d say, “Injection? I thought you said inspection.” And they’d probably feel bad. And maybe I could get out of it.” People speaking in their own language, people being just as they are in a world of difference, yet everybody understood, because the Spirit was present. You won’t believe what happened in church that Sunday. They came together grateful for what they had, but they had little reason for gratitude, but the spirit was there. And they came together focused on what they had to do. A mighty wind was blowing. It was the Holy Spirit, and it was a creative spirit, and the spirit was there. And they were with each other, speaking in their own way, but everyone understood. The spirit was there, the Holy Spirit. It was gratitude, it was creativity, it was understanding. It was Pentecost. When a group of people thought about the world as it could be, not as it was. The Holy Spirit was present, and the church was born as they set out to make it so. It’s hard to believe what happened, unless we believe it could happen again. And it could, because the Holy Spirit is present to us, trying to get our attention.