

THE CHURCH GROWS BECAUSE OF THE WORD OF GOD

Sermon for Pentecost, 2017

Acts 2:1-21

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, Acts 2:1-21: ¹ **When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.** ² **Suddenly a sound like a violent blast of wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.** ³ **They saw tongues that separated, like flames, and one rested on each of them.** ⁴ **They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak.**

⁵ **Jews who feared God from every nation under heaven were staying in Jerusalem.** ⁶ **When that sound occurred, a crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard the disciples speaking in his own native language.** ⁷ **They were astonished and amazed, and asked: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?”** ⁸ **Then how is it that every one of us hears in his own native language,** ⁹ **Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; people living in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and the province of Asia,** ¹⁰ **people living in Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, Jews as well as proselytes;** ¹¹ **and people from Crete and Arabia? We hear them declaring in our own languages the wonderful works of God.”**

¹² **They were all amazed and puzzled. They asked one another, “What does this mean?”** ¹³ **Others sneered: “They are full of new wine.”**

¹⁴ **Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and addressed them: “Men who are Jews and all of you who are living in Jerusalem, understand this, and listen closely to what I say!** ¹⁵ **These men are not drunk, as you suppose. For it is only nine in the morning.** ¹⁶ **Rather, this is what has been spoken through the prophet Joel:** ¹⁷ **‘In the last days, God says, “I shall pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.** ¹⁸ **Indeed, even on My male slaves and female slaves I shall pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.** ¹⁹ **I shall show wonders in the heaven above and miraculous signs on the earth below: blood, fire, and a cloud of**

smoke.²⁰ **The sun will turn dark, and the moon turn to blood before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord,²¹ and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**”””

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

God is a God of communication, and He speaks to us clearly and plainly through His Word. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy saying, “¹⁶ *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). And speaking through Isaiah God tells us, “*So is My Word that goes out from My mouth: it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it,*” (55:11). The Bible is God’s Word, and contains everything we need to know in order to be saved and live the Christian life.

Is it any wonder then that the Bible has been translated into 636 languages, the New Testament alone into 1442 languages, and Bible portions or stories into 1145 other languages? It’s said that some 5 billion copies of the Bible have been printed. It’s a pity that only a small number of them appear to be read on a regular basis today.

Luke’s mentioning of the coming of the Holy Spirit from our text today, is marked as the birth of the Christian Church. He begins by telling us that ¹**when the day of Pentecost had come...⁴ they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak**. Here we see God’s Word going out in many different languages. The Holy Spirit had given the miraculous ability for people to communicate in foreign languages. This is now the ongoing work of Christ, to which Luke alludes in his introduction to the Book of Acts: “*In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,*” (Acts 1:1). The work of Christ continues now through the Church. And that work would require the ability to communicate Christ to the world in a manner that is clear and direct. This sets up today’s text for our consideration.

Fifty days after Christ’s resurrection, the followers of Christ in Jerusalem **were all together in one place.**² **Suddenly a sound like a violent blast of wind came**

from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. The “all” who were “together” most likely included the entire group mentioned earlier in Acts 1:13-15. They may have been in the house where the upper room was located, in one of the meeting rooms of the temple area, or in another place. Our text doesn’t tell us why they’d gathered, but no doubt, they were gathered for worship and prayer. Since they were sitting, they were most likely listening to one of the apostles speak.

During this gathering, a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit was poured out on them. We read of **tongues that separated, like flames, resting on each of them.** There is a **sound like a violent blast of wind that came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.** And ⁴ **they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak.** They began to praise God by speaking of all that God had done in Christ. And miraculously, everyone in the crowd heard them speaking in his or her own language. ⁶ **When that sound occurred, a crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard the disciples speaking in his own native language.** ⁷ **They were astonished and amazed, and asked: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?”** ⁸ **Then how is it that every one of us hears in his own native language,** ⁹ **Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; people living in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and the province of Asia,** ¹⁰ **people living in Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, Jews as well as proselytes;** ¹¹ **and people from Crete and Arabia?”** Those who were together spoke in foreign languages that were previously unknown to them, in the very languages of the natives of the foreign lands who were presently assembled before them, and those hearing had perfect understanding. **“We hear them declaring in our own languages the wonderful works of God.”** They were hearing the glorious news about what God had done for them through Christ.

It’s also important for us to make clear that the tongues or languages here in our text were existing human languages, and not some kind of crazy babble that no one could understand. And it was not some kind of special Holy Spirit language. Luke makes this perfectly clear by mentioning several of the languages. God is not a God of confusion.¹ He does not want to create chaos. His desire is clear

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:33

communication. This is very different from the supposed speaking in “tongues” that we see in Pentecostal or charismatic churches. This is not a question of interpretation, but the clear reading of the text. Luke is talking about existing human languages and precludes any modern so-called speaking in tongues. The thing we see in charismatic circles was not what was happening here on Pentecost.

Why is this important? Because faith comes by hearing the Word of God.² The Church is the people of God - the believers in Jesus Christ. But believers do not exist apart from the hearing of the Word of God. If people are not told about Jesus Christ and what Christ has done for them, they cannot believe it. So while the Church is the people of God, it never exists apart from the marks of the Church - Word and Sacrament. Without the message that Christ died on the cross for your sins, the Church does not exist. And so we see this at Pentecost. The crowd gathered because of the complex miracles that were taking place. Luke says, ¹² **They were all amazed and puzzled. They asked one another, “What does this mean?”** But the people do not come to faith *until* Peter has preached the Word of God to them.

...Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and addressed them: “Men who are Jews and all of you who are living in Jerusalem, understand this, and listen closely to what I say! this is what has been spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ ‘In the last days, God says, “I shall pour out My Spirit on all people....” Peter starts in the Old Testament and applies the Old Testament Scriptures to what Christ had done. Peter preached Law and Gospel to them in classic, almost textbook, Lutheran fashion. When they understood what God had done and that they, because of their sins, bore responsibility for it, they were cut to the heart³, as though they were a blister with sand rubbed into it. They asked Peter what they were to do, and Peter told them: *“Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,”* (2:38). Peter’s message was God’s effective Word. Peter planted the seed, and God made it grow. We are told that the exalted Christ added three thousand believers to His church that day.

Meanwhile, we are also told by so many to chase after this gimmick or that method, and then you, too, can grow your own mega-church. But what’s all too

² Romans 10:17

³ Acts 2:37

often forgotten is what we see on Pentecost. The Church grows because people hear the clear, unadulterated Word of God. It is not a matter of some secret process. It is about communication. God communicates to us through His Word, that is, through Holy Scripture. The Spirit works by the Word and Baptism to bring people to faith in the Saviour. It worked that way for Peter. If Peter, an apostle, brought people to faith using the Word of God, how much more so will this be true for us today, who are hardly apostles! God speaks to us in human language using words and sentences. God speaks clearly in all languages.

This, then, is the focus of what Pentecost is to teach us. Christ died on the cross and rose again from the dead to give us forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting. That is the Gospel right there. Yes, generally we must prepare people for the Gospel by teaching the Law, as Peter did. They must see that they're sinners who need a Saviour. They need to see that they, by their sins, participated in the crucifixion of Christ, God the Son. But once they see their sin, they are ready to hear the message that all their sins are forgiven.

It's a message we also need to hear on a daily basis. For which of us is less of a sinner than anyone we see on the street? We also need to be constantly reminded that we have a Saviour, Christ the Lord. And so, as this message is clearly communicated, the Church is established, built up, and sustained. **“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”**

Thus we see, from the beginning, from its very birth in this world on Pentecost, the Church is about the Word. The Word, the Scriptures, are at the centre of everything. It is that Word that clearly communicates to us all what God has done for us, that we have a Saviour, Christ Jesus, by His death on the cross and His resurrection.

The Church is here to extend this call of God to all mankind, in our homelands and everywhere in the world. God pours out His Spirit on us and on our children so that we can extend His gospel call to others. May we faithfully do that work until the final day of the Lord dawns and Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR PENTECOST

Almighty, eternal God, we praise You today for giving the Holy Spirit to the Church to bear witness to Your saving truth in Jesus Christ. Fill Your Church again now with heavenly power, and sanctify Your people as they now come before You in praise and prayer.

We praise You, above all else, for the precious gifts of faith, eternal life, love, joy, and peace through Your Spirit. We thank You for His inspiration of the prophets and apostles who wrote Your Word. We thank You for protecting the Holy Scriptures, so that we still have them today. Grant that we may be eager to hear Your Word also today. May we receive the words we hear as Your words, and so remain in Your truth and life. Help us to appreciate them and to use them as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path day by day. Help the precious truths of Your Word to shine brightly among all people, so that many more may gladly accept Your truth, and trust in the Saviour. We thank and praise You for the willingness and courage that the Spirit has given to Your people ever since the days of the apostles, to spread the Gospel among the nations. Give us similar willingness and courage, that people everywhere may learn to sing Your praises and to rejoice in Your salvation.

Loving Father, by Your Spirit renew in us sincere repentance for our sins and faith in Jesus. Direct and rule our lives, that we may grow daily in knowing and loving You and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Give us the continuing peace and comfort of Christ's saving love. Arouse within us a genuine desire for all that is right, holy, pure, and just. Cleanse us in both body and soul so that, as temples of the Holy Spirit, we may be loyal to our Saviour, obedient to His words, faithful to His church, and untiring in deeds of love and mercy. Help us to live in holiness, and save us from all unrighteousness. Grant us the spirit of mercy, kindness, peace, and goodwill.

May Your truth and Word have pride of place throughout our land. Teach all people to walk in Your ways, and to respect Your holy will.

Give Your Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to all who must pass through dark valleys and deep waters, that they may find in You their strength and comfort for ever. Be the guardian of all in danger, the friend of all who are lonely, the strength of all who are tempted, the comfort of all who sorrow, the hope of all who despair, and the health of all who are sick. In everything, help us to be filled with the Holy Spirit, for Jesus' sake, in whose precious name we pray. Amen.

PENTECOST

Numbers 11:24-30

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He also gathered seventy men from the elders of the people and made them stand around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in a cloud and spoke to him, and He took some of the Spirit who was on Moses and put Him on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not continue to do it. ²⁶ Two men, the one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, had remained in the camp. The Spirit also rested on them. They had been among those who had been listed, but had not gone out to the tent. However, they prophesied in the camp.

²⁷ Then a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!”

²⁸ Joshua, the son of Nun, who had been Moses’ assistant since he had been a young man, spoke up and said, “My master, Moses, stop them!”

²⁹ Moses asked him: “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the people of the LORD were prophets, and that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!”

³⁰ Then Moses and the elders of Israel went back to the camp.

Acts 2:1-21

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the name of the Lord will be saved.’””

John 7:37-39

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried aloud, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink! ³⁸ As the Scripture has said, ‘Streams of living water will flow from inside the person who believes in Me.’” ³⁹ By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were going to receive. For the Spirit had not yet come, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.