

The Festival of Pentecost • May 15, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Acts 2:1-21 (Genesis 11:1-9)

“All Mixed Up”

It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. Why else would people have devoted the time and the resources necessary to build a city and a tower? They had cutting-edge technology that could make their vision reality. If they built it, they'd have a place to live for generations and generations. They've have security. They'd be famous. What's not to love about that?

Well, sure, God *had* instructed Noah and his descendants to go spread out across the earth after the Flood. And a big reason for God's sending of Flood was that people did what was right in their own eyes rather than living according to God's design. But these people looked to be doing pretty well for themselves. They had good land and good building material. They were proud of their self-sufficiency and independence. What did they need God for anymore? So they built the city. They built the tower. Because they could.

We're even better off than they were. Look around. You have cutting-edge technology supporting your day-to-day routine. You have means of transportation that can get you pretty much wherever you'd want to go. You don't have to go hunting or raise your own crops to get enough food to eat. You don't have to make your own clothes, or build your own home. Odds are that most of us wouldn't even know how to accomplish those feats. Yet together, people are able to grow and distribute crops – I'd be surprised if your bananas at home are locally-sourced – and build towering megastructures like the Burj Khalifa and One World Trade Center. We can share information – and selfies – from anywhere at anytime. What do you need God for anymore?

Like the people of the place that would be called Babel, we're all mixed up. That name Babel sounds like the Hebrew word for “confused,” like when you pick up and shake a jar to mix up its contents. God came down from on high to see the city and the tall tower that the people had built in their pride. And there was the problem: the people's pride was confused, self-centered. They wanted security. They weren't interested in spreading out across the earth. Their skills and abilities tricked them into thinking that they shouldn't depend on God. They wanted to be praised for their own greatness.

So how great are you and I? Is self-centered, confused pride still an issue for us? Do you believe that you've got it all figured out, like the people of Babel, that everybody else should listen to you – regardless of what God's Word says? Are your relationships with your family, your friends, and your enemies perfect? How about your relationship with God? Is it everything that it should be? Or do you feel all mixed up?

God came down at Babel to see the people's confused pride in action, but to keep them from diving farther into their self-centered behavior He confused their language and separated them out into different nations. God came down all the more in Jesus of Nazareth to see firsthand humanity's confused pride in action. Yet to deliver us and all people from our foolish and self-centered living, he went up – on the tree of the cross. Instead of scattering us out again, God draws us together, giving forgiveness and new life through His Son.

That's where Pentecost comes in. Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning, is the anti-Babel. The Holy Spirit came in power that day – not for the glory of the disciples gathered in that place, but to provide the unity that our confused world needs: unity in our Savior. Our self-important pride confuses our relationships with the people around us just as it confused our relationship with God. So God the Son – Jesus, who is both God and man – came down from heaven for the sake of people like you and me, people who are all mixed up.

The Holy Spirit turns people from self-important pride and points us to Jesus. When the Spirit is at work, you can acknowledge that God is really the One at the center of everything, not you. The Holy Spirit drives out confusion and re-orient us to be as we were created to be. The Spirit works on you to deliver the fruits of Jesus' victory over sin and death, reconnecting you with your loving Creator so that you can have what you really need. Through Him, you have faith. Through Him, you have life.

The unity that God the Spirit brings into the world is a reversal of Babel. This unity moves inwards, bringing us closer to God in each new day of life, opening our minds and hearts to hear and follow His instruction and to know His joy. This unity moves outwards, too, connecting peoples and nations, just as it did in Jerusalem long ago. The people who had gathered there from around the known world heard

Galileans proclaiming the mighty works of God in the native tongues of far-off lands. But the miracle of that first Christian Pentecost wasn't just in the skill of language the Spirit gave to the disciples: the greater part was the giving of faith and life to about three thousand people who had been separated by the curse of Babel. In the same way, the Spirit is at work today so that you and I can speak the good news of life with God in Jesus in the opportunities that He puts before us each day. And the Spirit is working to bring that outward unity into our mixed-up relationships with our families, our friends, and even our enemies.

As the apostle Peter announced to the crowds, the days of the fulfillment of God's purpose have arrived in Jesus. He is restoring that which was broken back in Eden. The sign of the age to come is the presence of the Holy Spirit, working in and through His Church. The seasons of the first half of the church year recall the events of Jesus' earthly life: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. In the season after Pentecost, we go through the half of the church calendar that we call "ordinary time." This season points us to the new life that we have in Jesus through the work of the Spirit as He disciples us.

God is still making the reversal of Babel reality through the Church. At Pentecost, the disciples spoke in many tongues, proclaiming the mighty deeds of God. The Church still speaks in many tongues, as our brothers and sisters in Christ are gathered together around the world in sanctuaries and huts and cathedrals and homes. Sometimes the music would sound familiar to you, sometimes it wouldn't. But still the Church proclaims the mighty deeds of God, done in love for His people. He brings us together through His Spirit – with Him and with each other. What's not to love about that?

Amen.