

Sermon on Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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The Day God Broke Out of Church

One of the things that we most love about Minnesota is the day on which winter's cold and gloom finally sheds its icy grip on Minnesotans and warm, spring winds and a picture blue sky break through, and we can go outside! We had one of those days this past Friday. It was perfect! The air was so warm, the smells so fragrant, the sky so blue that even the most pessimistic in our state broke out in a great, joyful sigh of relief. Those among us who rant on social media about the terrible Minnesota weather were silenced, if only for a day, by the beauty of God's creation.

It is another gift that spring has arrived on the weekend of the great feast of Pentecost. You know, we have an image of Pentecost that is centered on an ancient story of 12 disciples gathered in an upper room AFTER the wind of the Holy Spirit blew through. We picture 12 disciples standing in a circle, looking at each other with "tongues of fire" dancing on their heads. We hear them speaking in other tongues, different languages that they hadn't learned before, which must have sounded like just a bunch of gibberish. A strange story, indeed.

But what if...there's another message that God is giving us on this day of Pentecost? Here's how I prefer to think about Pentecost: I think of it as *The Day God Broke Out of Church!* Before you condemn this as "sacrilegious", just think about it. Once the Holy Spirit blew through the room, and the disciples started speaking in other languages, where did they go, and to whom did they speak? Not just to one another inside that room. They went *downstairs, and outside into the street, to speak with the thousands of people who had come to Jerusalem from all the countries of the Roman Empire, to celebrate the Jewish harvest festival called "Pentecost"*. While the disciples had been mostly hiding out inside, behind closed doors in their "sanctuary" – except when Jesus called them out – waiting for directions from Jesus to tell them what to do, once the Holy Spirit descended on them, God gave them power and boldness to go outside at long last, and the ability to speak to others, which they had never shown before! And what did they say? They went outside to tell all those pilgrims, in languages that they could understand, about the wondrous acts of God. Scripture says they spoke about God's deeds of power, and that the crowd was amazed and astonished, because they knew that they were only uneducated Galileans, who shouldn't know how to speak so fluently in the languages of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and those spoken

in Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya, and even visitors from Rome – who perhaps spoke Latin or Greek!

These Galileans were not trained linguists, or biblical scholars – they were fishermen! How did they learn all of this! Some said they must be drunk! But as Peter reminded them as he began his sermon out on the street, it was only nine o'clock in the morning! They were speaking prophecy from the Bible, and he quoted the prophet Joel, who spoke of a new time when young women would prophesy, young men see visions, and old men dream dreams! The prophet told of terrible signs that would come in the last days, of the sun turning to darkness and the moon turning to blood, but not to bring destruction, but the Lord's great and glorious day, *when everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved!* Not just a select, exclusive few, but everyone, all people, would call on the Lord's name, and have new life, forever! This shows that God speaks in all languages – bringing the good news of salvation to each child of God in every human tongue.

We forget how revolutionary such a message was, because some of us are so familiar with the story. In those days, worship was centered in the Temple, under the control of the high priests, who were the only ones who could enter the holy sanctuary of God, where birds, goats, lambs and bulls were sacrificed on the altar of God, to atone for the sins of human beings. Greek and Roman temples, and the temples of all religions known to humankind were similar, offering sacrifices of food, animals, and sometimes even human beings to satisfy the appetite of numerous gods in cities and towns throughout the world. The teaching of God's word in scripture was relegated to Jewish synagogues in Judea, in Galilee, and in all the countries of the Empire where the Hebrew people had scattered, taught by rabbis indoors. Only John the Baptist and the other prophets of old, like Jeremiah, Isaiah and others, spoke God's word publicly outside. If someone sought to encounter God, or hear God's Word, they were used to going inside these temples and synagogues.

But Jesus was different. He walked the streets and traveled from town to town, teaching a new Word from God outside in the open air, sometimes by the side of the road, sometimes in a boat on the water, sometimes by the edge of the sea, sometimes on a mountain. Other times he taught indoors, in the homes of his disciples, occasionally in the synagogues, at meals in the homes of Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus was just as likely to preach God's word outdoors than indoors. And not until the last days of Jesus' ministry did he go to the Temple of Jerusalem to preach and teach, in a great challenge to the Temple's authority, and that of the priests and the scribes, with the good news of forgiveness and love.

My point is, that usually religion and the worship of God has taken place inside temples, synagogues and churches, safely under the control of human authorities, of rabbis and priests, pastors, bishops and popes. But the prophets,

John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostles who followed him, challenged the status quo and brought the Word of God out into the streets, the marketplace, even prisons, to bring God's good news of repentance, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation into the world where the people lived, struggled, suffered and waited for a word of hope from God. Like Moses, who brought God's demand of freedom to a people suffering in the bondage of slavery in Egypt, Jesus brought God's word of liberation to people suffering under the Romans and under their own leaders.

So on the day of Pentecost, crowds of people from every foreign country imaginable came to Jerusalem, expecting to go to the Temple to do their duty to God by bringing their sacrifices and burnt offerings from the harvest. They came to pay their Temple taxes, celebrate a bit, and get out of town. They came to a city occupied by Roman soldiers, and heard the Latin orders of their oppressors.

Into all this confusion, a motley band of Galileans spilled out into the streets, speaking the languages of all the people out there, telling everyone about the power of God, who had sent a Son to save them, who offered them mercy, hope, and new life! It was revolutionary! A bunch of nobodies from Galilee came out proclaiming the good news of God in a man called Jesus (whose name means "savior"), speaking in the everyday language of commoners, out in the streets where neither Romans nor priests were in control! God had created the chaos of the Spirit, and it was God's great act of liberation from the "sameness" and the hopelessness that human authorities always use to control their subjects. Actually, Pentecost is the "scariest" of all our festivals, because through the multiplicity of languages God turned a whole city into chaos with new words of God's power. It is also one of the most hopeful of festivals, because now the Spirit gives us humans the power to break out of the bondage to our fears of what is outside and keeps us inside, and bound! All with the power of God's word of love, of freedom and mercy, forgiveness and grace! For the power of God's word cannot be silenced!

So what does this have to do with us, and the Church today? Certainly WE are not in need of liberation – we are not bound by anything, we are Americans, we are free, and slaves to nothing, or no one! Right? Well, maybe, just maybe, we have been conditioned to think that the primary place where we encounter God is here, inside a church building. We look for God in a Temple, in a book, on an altar or a stained glass window, when the truth is that *God is everywhere*, and the truth of God blows like the wind – and we can't control it! This God, whom we seek to confine by our lack of imagination, is what many people in this generation are rejecting, as they look for "more". A God who is with them, "out there."

Pentecost reminds us how language enters in as a means of control -where some say only the "language of our ancestors and parents is God's language", where some say there is only one "English" that should be spoken in our nation and in our churches.

So what is the “official language of God”? Some say (with Biblical evidence) that it is Hebrew. Others, that God’s language is Greek – the language of the New Testament. Centuries later, the Roman Catholic Church said God’s language is “Latin”. Some Americans today want it to be English! But Pentecost teaches us that God speaks in *all languages!* Maybe even Swedish! Certainly God speaks in Spanish, Chinese, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, Khmer, Lakota, Ojibwe, Somali, and every single language that God and immigrants choose to speak!

125 years ago our Lutheran church ancestors spoke German in worship, and brought it to this land where English was spoken in the streets. The founders of Redeemer boldly decided to start a church where worship and Christian faith would be taught in English, the language of their children and of the streets, to break out of the tendency to hold fast to what they knew from their childhood. There were only a few of them, but they wanted to grow with their city.

So we proclaim this Pentecost that God sends the Holy Spirit among us today. You and I receive this Spirit of God in our baptism into Christ. We are reminded today that we have received this power, which gives us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God’s presence, now and forever – if you remember, from your confirmation blessing! God gives us this power to break out of the bondage we are in to our possessions, to success, to the acquisition of wealth, to time-our schedules – and our calendars, and to the opinions of our peers and other people, rather than God. God is calling us by the Spirit to no longer be confined in our faith by what we find inside one church building or denomination, but to embrace the entire universe of God’s beauty, wisdom and power!

So today you and I are invited by God to go out beyond the walls of the Church where we feel safe, yet are confined, out into the streets where God is calling us, driving us with the wind of faith by the Spirit, where Jesus has gone before us, beckoning us to come. Wherever human beings live, who long to hear the good news of hope that Jesus brings. That is where God is calling you and me, and it takes this strange passage in the book of Acts which shows us the true power of language, to get our attention! So I close with the prayer for this day:

Mighty God, you breathe life into our bones, and your Spirit brings truth into the world. Send us this Spirit, transform us by your truth, and give us language to proclaim your gospel, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.