

A Sermon on Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Last Sunday I began the sermon for the Feast of Jesus' Ascension into heaven by asking "*Where is Jesus?*" Good question. There were many answers: Jesus is here, Jesus is in your heart, Jesus is in the bread and wine, Jesus is everywhere, Jesus is at the right hand of God. You see, it all depends on who you ask, and what scripture verse you are reading.

Today I begin with another question: "*Where is the Church?*" Now you could say the Church is here, where we have gathered in Jesus' name to worship and pray. You could also say that the Church is the Body of Christ throughout the world, or wherever two or three have gathered in his Jesus' name. So is the Church here inside, or is it out there? It all depends on who you ask!

Today we have gathered as the Church – as a very small part of the Church – in Jesus name to worship and celebrate the Affirmation of Baptism – the Confirmation of four young men named Jared, Phoenix, Michael and Isaiah, and affirm all of our baptisms, on this Feast day known as Pentecost, 50 days after Easter. Many call this the "birthday of the Church". I know I sometimes have. But Pentecost is not the birthday of the Church – it's not even a feast day that we Christians can claim for our own! Pentecost has always been a Jewish harvest festival, held 50 days after Passover, celebrated by faithful Jews for centuries after the Exodus from Egypt, which just happened to be celebrated in Jerusalem at the very time God sent the Holy Spirit onto Jesus' disciples with a very special power. So what does the Bible say about all of this?

In Exodus 23:14 we read that "*Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the feast of unleavened bread [Passover] ... You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. [and] You shall observe the festival of ingathering [the festival of booths] at the end of the year[in autumn], when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.*" The festival of harvest is also known as the Festival of Weeks (or Pentecost – in Greek, 50 days). So this was an ancient festival of the Israelites – and so, the Jews – which was observed at the time of the wheat harvest in June. These festivals were celebrated with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem – so, as with Passover, Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims for the Feast of Pentecost.

It was on this 50th day after Jesus' resurrection, 10 days after Jesus had ascended into heaven (remember our story last week?), when Jesus' disciples were waiting in Jerusalem as Jesus had sent them, closed inside a house together waiting for something to happen – anxiously waiting – on the Day of Pentecost, with

thousands of pilgrim Jews milling around in the streets outside from every corner of the Mediterranean world, when this strange thing happened. Luke describes it: *“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.”*

Was this the gibberish coming out of their mouths, that we sometimes associate with being “in the Spirit” – that we can witness on television or live in some churches today – in Pentecostal churches? No, this gift was a very practical one of being able to speak actual languages of other human beings – without taking a language course or signing up for Rosetta Stone on line or listening to cds or cassette tapes over and over. It was immediate and as powerful as a spark lighting a fire – and the symbol of this power was the flames of fire alighting on each disciples’ head. We don’t know what they said to each other, but imagine the scene, as Galilean Jews (who only knew Aramaic and Hebrew in their out of the way region to the north of Jerusalem) spilled out into the street saying “Hey, what’s this? I can speak in other languages that I never learned!” Then the crowd spoke up in astonishment, because they heard these un-educated Galileans, the North Dakotans of the Midwest, speaking in their own native languages – in the words of Parthians, or Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya, and visitors from Rome who spoke Latin, and Cretans and Arabs! They were amazed that these simple fisher folk spoke in words they understood about God’s deeds of power! “What does this mean?” Some cynics said, “They are filled with new wine!” For it was the first fruits festival, and wine poured freely from vendors.

But then Peter stepped forward, speaking loudly as usual, and said, “We are not drunk! It’s only 9:00 in the morning!” And then Peter quoted the Old Testament prophet Joel, about the last days when God would pour out God’s Spirit upon all flesh, and sons and daughters would prophesy – speak the word of the Lord – young men would see visions and old men would dream dreams. This power would come even to slaves, women and men, on whom God would pour God’s Spirit to speak. They would speak about signs in the heavens and on earth, the sun would be turned to darkness (a solar eclipse?) and the moon red with blood, and then *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved!”*

Wow. Crazy stuff. But this was how Peter used scripture, to find meaning in the present moment, interpreting the prophet Joel’s words from the Old Testament to make sense of what had just happened – in the Spirit giving Jesus’ followers the ability to speak in languages they had never known before. Did you expect Peter to remain silent? No, of course not!

So as we have done all year in confirmation class, and as we do in the Church every single Sunday for worship, and every time we gather to read and study scripture, we use it to make sense of what is happening today in our personal lives, in the Church, and in our world. Isn't this the task of all of us Christians? We gather as the Church to worship God and hear God's Word - from the Old and the New Testaments, to discern what God is teaching us through God's Word, interpret it, and guide us in how we live today and tomorrow? That's what Peter did - he used the prophet's Joel's words to say that this was a mighty act of God, to send God's Spirit upon Jesus' followers, to give them the ability to tell others what God had done in Jesus, and share it with others in their own language! Just as Joel had said God would do, centuries before. So our task in these days is to discern how scripture and our faith help us to make sense of what is going on around us and inside us - the good, the bad, and what doesn't seem to relate at all.

It starts with *asking questions* - the most important skill for any human being who seriously inquires about things of faith! In this confirmation class we don't listen and take notes to memorize what the pastor teaches - we learn to ask questions and discuss what we each can contribute in our search for meaning. [Oh - did you do it differently in YOUR confirmation class, brothers and sisters?] So think about our first lesson from Genesis, the story of the Tower of Babel. One reason this story is in the Bible was perhaps to answer the question: "*Why are there so many languages spoken?*" Or maybe the question was "*Why can't we understand the people who live in the next town, or across the border?*" It could be that this story was told to answer with an interpretation from the point of view of faith, from the rabbis: Once upon a time the people spoke only one language. But they became filled with themselves, and wanted to build a great tower, in order to reach by themselves to the same level as God. As they built this tower, God was not please, so God confused them by making them each speak different languages, so that they couldn't understand one another, and scattered them abroad over the face of the earth. The tower was abandoned, because they couldn't work with one another anymore, and it became known as Babel, because there the Lord confused the languages of all the earth. And that is why there are so many languages, and people today cannot understand one another. It's a great story - which doesn't have to be taken literally to make the point: that we are all divided because we cannot understand one another, but our failing in the first place, our *sin*, was trying to be like God - ourselves, without God. Isn't this what sin is?

So when we come to the story of Pentecost, we see how God resolves the issue "*in these last days*" as Peter put it - NOT by giving everyone the same language to speak, but giving those who would share the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus the ability to speak *in the language of others!* Not for everyone else to become a Galilean Jew and speak Hebrew or Aramaic, but for Galileans to

speak the languages of a dozens of other peoples throughout the world! Because the word of God's compassion and mercy, of reconciliation and new life must not *remain inside one house in Jerusalem* (or one church in Rome, or on the corner of Dale and Carroll in St. Paul), but go out into the streets around those places where people of faith are gathered, taken by individuals (not just the rabbi, or pastors, or even Jesus himself!) who had the faith, the courage and the power of the Spirit to take it outside! Who dare to leave the comfort of our pews, our music, and our beautiful stained glass windows and speak to our neighbors and friends a word of comfort in their suffering and anxiety, a word of mercy to go with food for the hungry, a word of hope to those around us who live in hopelessness or despair.

In our Confirmation class, this would become a discussion around the need to act like a friend to someone who is lonely and isolated, or solidarity with a classmate being bullied. Maybe it means to sit with a kid who sits alone at lunch, or to try to get to know the student from another country, who speaks a strange language or dresses funny. For being a follower of Jesus – a Christian – doesn't just mean coming to church on Sundays and holy days, to fulfill your obligations. It means taking the words you hear about love, about being a neighbor, and your values out into the street and neighborhood, to your school, to the mall and to your job. Isn't this, then, the same calling that each one of you and I have?

The lesson of Pentecost, by this interpretation, is not to invite everyone in the city or world to become like us, become Lutherans, cherish our liturgy and sing our beloved hymns, much as we would love it and welcome those who do! The lesson of Pentecost is that God sends us the Spirit in order to send us out into the streets of this world to communicate God's great acts of love and mercy for our neighbors, in the name of Jesus Christ! It is to follow Jesus' example in going to sit with others not "like" him, to listen to their stories, hear their passions, understand their sufferings, and what excites them. The invitation to be part of this community of faith is important, but it's not the main point, after all! It is to share the good news of new life that God promises to all God's children, as Jesus calls each one of us to do!

So today we will all affirm our baptisms in solidarity with Jared, Phoenix, Mike and Isaiah, and welcome Matt, Carrie and Jon into this community of faith. We will re-affirm our baptismal promises *to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper*. But it doesn't end here! We also promise *to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth!* That cannot happen if we stay inside the church building! For this we need to go outside. To proclaim good news to others we need to understand and be understood. To serve all people we need to approach them. And for justice and peace to happen, we have to work for it! Thanks be to God!