

Acts 2:1-21 “A Sign of Reconciliation”

Did you know that Pentecost is a *Jewish* Holy Day? I don't think I've really mentioned that in the ten years I've been here. It's also known as “Shavuot” or “The Feast of Weeks.” It's celebrated fifty days after Passover, and believe it or not, it's a grain harvest festival which seems strange to us considering we don't harvest much of *anything* this time of year here in NorCal. On Pentecost, the Jewish people would bring the first fruits of their wheat harvest to offer at the Temple in Jerusalem. We Christians have sort of taken over this Holy Day in *our* tradition and *we* call it the “birthday of the church” because it's where the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus' followers and the church started spreading like wildfire. I tell you this because I want to give a little context to the passage that Nina read, because without knowing about the Feast of Weeks, we really don't have a very good handle on *why* all these “devout Jews from every nation” were gathered in one place in Jerusalem. Well now you know, and now we can talk about how we co-opted Pentecost and made it one of the top three high Holy Days in *the Christian* calendar. “Eh ... they weren't using it much ... might as well,” right? It's like having your birthday on Christmas. On one hand, it's kind of cool, but you can't help feeling a little robbed at the same time. So ... back to Pentecost and how our way of observing it ties in to the Jewish celebration. Remember that up until this point in time, almost all of Jesus' followers were Israelite Jews. And Judaism is a religion that is so strongly associated with a single racial and national community, that the notion of the God of Israel wanting to call *non-Jews* to faith was absurd. The church of Jesus was not to be some mono-cultural, mono-lingual, homogenous community of faith. It was to be a sign of the reconciliation of *all* peoples regardless of ethnic or linguistic differences. They were to be a diverse yet united people in Christ.

Here's the thing about this story, which for you folks taking the Acts Bible Study Class is going to be a bit of a repeat, but bear with me. Acts wasn't meant to be a history book. It was meant to be a faith-building, inspirational book. The writer wasn't all that good about getting the

names and dates of rulers straight, but he was *great* at letting people know why the church was so special! So Luke would go back into the Old Testament and grab a passage from the prophets and say, “See? This whole event is the fulfillment of scripture!” So in this passage, he went to the Prophet Joel who wrote that on the day of the Lord, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” Luke is saying, “See? See? This is what I’m talking about! You will be made *one* through the Holy Spirit because *it’s in the scriptures!*”

But here’s an Old Testament connection that sometimes gets overlooked. Let’s talk about the story of the Tower of Babel. You can find that in Genesis 11. I’ll give you a recap, but once you hear it you might recognize it even if you’re not familiar with Bible stories. This one is about the descendants of Noah who after the whole flood/ark incident, spread out through the land and started settling down. Some of them settled in a place called “Shinar,” which is right smack dab in the middle of modern-day Iraq ... specifically where the ancient city of Babylon stood. These people thought it would be a good idea to build a big, sprawling city with a huge tower in the middle of it ... a tower that would literally reach the heavens! God had a different plan though. See, God thought they were getting a little too big for their britches, so God said, “Let’s confuse their language so these people won’t understand each other and then they’ll just scatter all over the earth and not be a threat!” So the place became known as “Babel” because God confused their language and they dispersed all over the earth.

When you study the Bible, you realize that there are no wasted words and that most of the stories in Genesis are symbols for big, world-changing events. Those people who lived in Babel ... also known as the Babylonians ... ended up being one of the most feared, powerful empires in the ancient world. When they built their empire, they used violence, fear and intimidation to expand. Their ideal was to conquer by

assimilation. If you're a Star Trek fan, they're like the Borg. The Babylonians would find a city or any place where people were gathered, and they'd go there and say to them, "We are Babylon. Lower your shields and surrender. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile." And that's what would happen. The people they conquered had to assimilate to Babylonian culture. They had to adopt to Babylon's language and Babylon's customs. Their culture was absorbed to the point where they were no longer distinct. And that's what the story of the Tower of Babel is about – Babylon's goal is to assimilate you by force and unite you through a common language and culture. Why? So they can be seen as gods. After all, they have a tower that reaches the heavens where the gods live. See it? So don't mess with Babylon. We will force you to be one people under our rule. Resistance is futile. But that wasn't a part of God's plan, so God scattered the people so they *could* have their own distinct languages and cultures.

But on the day of Pentecost, the tables got turned. The Holy Spirit wanted to unite people. Which people? *All* people! So just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit came and made it so. But *not* like the Babylonians! The Babylonians did it by forcing the people to learn one language and assimilating them right off the map. But on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on all these people from different regions who spoke different languages and had different customs, all of a sudden they could understand each other. And it's not like they all spoke the same language either. Notice it doesn't say that the spirit made them speak a *new* language. It says they began to speak in *each other's* language. And even better ... everyone there *understood* each other's language! Nobody's biological, technological, cultural or linguistic distinctiveness was assimilated. Those things remained intact! Why? Because God's desire is that *all* peoples of *all* races, and nations, and cultures, and creeds should be united in Christ. United, *yes*. But *not* by force. Diversity is important. Diversity is encouraged.

Wow! Mind blown! The God who scattered earth's people way back in ancient times ... before the Prophets, before the Kingdom of Israel, before Moses, before Abraham ... that God is now drawing all people back together to be one again. The beauty of Pentecost is that we can worship and live together as Parthians, Elamites, Jordanians, Europeans, Saudi Arabians, Guatemalans, Philipinos, Jakartans, Nigerians, Icelandians, and Americans. We are united through the Holy Spirit. At least that's God's desire. For this to happen, though, the walls need to be torn down so that the Spirit of the Living God can dwell among God's people and unite us! And yet ... we seem to be okay with the notion of *building* more walls. The primary miracle of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was *breaking down* the barriers of communication that were set in place at Babel. Wouldn't it be nice if happened in *this* day and age? But the problem is, fear and this insane desire to protect what is ours has made this next to impossible.

Even Religious leaders seem to be getting behind the idea that we need to shut others out and create more barriers. Or worse yet, go out and do it the Babylonian way and just assimilate people! And that's the challenge that those early followers of Jesus faced as the church began to grow. The Religious leaders were their biggest obstacles! Why? Because they couldn't seem to make a distinction between Caesar's Empire, and God's unfolding Kin-dom. Why is it so hard? I think it's hard because we're afraid. Fear motivates us to be defensive and self-protective. It motivates us to hold on dearly to what we think is ours and ours whether it's language, culture, ideologies, or whatever else keeps us separate. It drives us to create barriers, not just to keep others out, but to keep "us" in the safety of our comfort zones. But when the Holy Spirit comes as she did on the Day of Pentecost ... the Spirit moves us to testify to the truth and to the inevitability of *God's* Kin-dom arriving. Speaking the truth is the task ... the work ... of the Holy Spirit. And our task as Christ's followers is to do likewise ... to speak the truth in love as our response to the Spirit of the Living God so that we might be one.

If I get everything I need to get done for the week, I take Fridays off. It's my reward for getting my "church stuff" done. And even though I had a short week, I got it all done by Friday. Usually on my days off, I do house chores or yardwork and catch up on the week's news. I didn't do that this Friday though. It was my day to host the radio show so I was trying to keep my mind off everything else going on in the world so I'd be mentally prepared for the show. So I did my house chores to music instead of news. Then I threw the kayaks up on the truck because Graham and I wanted to go to Black Butte Reservoir after my show. So I did my show, got home and we went to Black Butte and had a great time. Then we came home, had dinner, folded laundry in front of a movie and went to bed. I got up Saturday morning, and Mary said, "Hey, we haven't gone yard sale-ing in a long time. Want to go?" Sure! Then we came home so I thought I'd plug in my news podcasts and get caught up on yard work. Remember -- I hadn't heard or read the news since Thursday. And wouldn't you know it, I tuned in and learned of yet another school shooting. A seventeen year old in Texas armed with a standard, non-automatic revolver and a shotgun opened fire killing eight students, two teachers and injuring ten more. Part of me felt bad because I chose not to listen to the news on Friday. Another part of me wished I hadn't tuned in at all. Not again. This is the *eighteenth* school shooting this year. Yet another horrific record set. I just wanted to drop everything, throw my stuff in the truck, go to the mountains and hide.

But hiding is basically what the disciples had been doing up until that day when the Spirit came rushing in like a mighty wind driving them out of their little room ... pushing them out into this diverse crowd of strangers gathered for the Pentecost offering. Then tongues of fire descended on not only the disciples but the whole crowd filling them and preparing them to proclaim the good news that God is making the world one through Christ. The only thing I could think at the moment was, "How can this be when we're so sick and fearful and divided? When our leaders ... even our religious leaders ... want to impose the ways of Babylon and make us even more afraid?" The only thing I could think to do was to pray the prayer that Christians often pray when we

have no words -- “Come, Holy Spirit, come. Set our hearts on fire so that we can move beyond the walls that we’ve built and drive us into a world that needs to be united by the wind and fire of your Holy Spirit. Come, Lord Jesus and move among your people so that we might set aside what divides us ... so that we may understand each other better ... that we may still remain distinct, but that we may also listen and hear one another so that we can unite to heal this broken world ... that we might proclaim that we are one in your Spirit. Amen.”