

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. *Amen.*

“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,” Philip says. His statement is part of a conversation between Jesus and the disciples that was surely difficult for all of them. Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure, telling them he will be leaving them to go to his Father. We can hear his exasperation in his reply. “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” He’s been telling them this very thing for three years; but still they want more: more proof, more reassurance of their own abilities, more time to prepare for what their Lord has in mind for them in the future.

Jesus does his best to reassure them. “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever...the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Like so many other things Jesus said to them, I imagine the disciples had a hard time getting their heads around what he was saying, especially since he told them the world would not see the Holy Spirit, who will be known only by those who believe.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, which in a way serves as a hinge between the fifty-day season of Easter and the long season known as “after Pentecost.” For us it’s a remembrance of God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. For Greek-speaking Jews in Jesus’ day it was also known as Pentecost; to others it was the Feast of Weeks, a festival celebrated fifty days after Passover. It was a joyful celebration, originally agricultural, when the first fruits of the grain harvest were offered. By the first century, it also became a time to commemorate the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai.

On the first occasion of this festival after Jesus ascended to God, his disciples were gathered together. We don’t know whether that was to celebrate the Feast of Weeks or simply to stay close to one another, maybe to plan their next steps. The unmistakable entrance of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate Jesus had promised them, surely surprised them, perhaps even more than Jesus’ sudden appearance had surprised them after his crucifixion and resurrection. In Acts Luke describes a sound like the rush of a *violent* wind, accompanied by divided tongues as of fire, reminding us that the work and movement of the Holy Spirit is not always gentle and easy. We know from the Book of Acts that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the disciples became apostles, and we know that their work was not easy, never gentle, often dangerous, surely nerve-wracking, even frightening.

But what happened next to those devout Jews who were also in Jerusalem is even more amazing. Suddenly everyone could understand each other in a unifying change that could only have been an act of God’s Holy Spirit. Because we’re so comfortable with our own language, it’s hard to imagine what that day was like. If you’ve ever been to Disney World or another place where peoples of many languages and nations gather from around the globe, you might have a sense of what could happen if there were no communication barriers. Think of what we could learn from people of other countries and cultures if we all spoke and understood the same language.

It sounds wonderful in theory. In a perfect world, removing the language obstacles could be the first step toward a global community. *Could* be. Sadly, as we know, it will take much more than the unity of language to bring unity to our world. Still, it seems apparent that was God’s desire through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And surely that is what our Christian ancestors believed, because on the Day of Pentecost we celebrate not only the gift of the Holy Spirit, but also the birth of the Church. It’s surely appropriate for us to use this occasion as a time to think about what has happened in the past two thousand years to divide the community that was created on that first Christian Pentecost. The story of the Tower of Babel offers us insights because the similarities of

that even and our own culture and its contemporary churches is unmistakable.

In our modern mind-set, we might find it easiest to understand what happened in this story as Richard Boyce describes it in his commentary.<sup>1</sup> Boyce says that “If this story appeared anywhere other than the Bible, and if the names of the teams involved were almost anything other than ‘the whole earth,’ on the one hand, and ‘the Lord,’ on the other, we would recognize it immediately...as a showdown, a battle between two teams.” Disagreements between God and humankind are not uncommon in the Hebrew scripture, but this one is somehow different. It takes place at a time when the peoples of the earth are multiplying but are still together as one people. They are anxious about being scattered and separated from each other, so they come up with this plan to build a tower reaching up into the heavens. God reacts by confusing their language, making it impossible for them to remain one people.

We can understand why God was bothered by what they did; they were invading heavenly territory, figuratively and literally reaching for power that belonged to God alone. God had the final say, scattering them abroad over the face of the earth. No longer united, they developed languages, cultures, and customs unlike those of any other group of people, thereby segregating each community from the others. After a time, God sent Jesus Christ to teach us how to treat each other, how to love each other, how to worship God. Later, the Holy Spirit came to help us accomplish what Jesus had taught, to enable us to be God’s ambassadors to the world. On that first Pentecost, God created the community that would become the Church, the uniting and united community through which God’s vision for the world would become reality.

For a time the Church lived up to its purpose; but then the Church became churches and religion became a dividing factor rather than a source of unity. Over the years this separation took shape as individualism, and now we see the Church has lost its priority in our culture and also in our lives. It’s hard to admit, but when we look for the reasons why this has happened, we’re always brought back to our own priorities and the focus of our lives. At some point we stopped asking what we can do for our Lord and our church and instead asked what our Lord and our church will do for us. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1940s, said the church is the only society that exists for the benefit of non-members. Dietrich Bonhoeffer took it a step farther, stating that “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others.” As its members, we can do that only when *we* live for Christ.

David Thompson tells a story of a family of four on a vacation camping trip.<sup>2</sup> “The sky was dark as deepest India ink. The night air was cool. The family gathered around a blazing, crackling campfire. The burning embers were alive with heat and light—on this perfect vacation evening. The mother told her young son and daughter (who were less than excited about having to go to church the next day): ‘Each of you take your marshmallow stick. Pull one of the embers out and leave it at the edge of the fire. Then just sit still and watch it awhile.’

“As they watched their burning embers, the daughter noticed that they began to change. From a brilliant, glowing yellow-white, they turned to deep, dark orange ... then to dull red. The ‘pulled out’ embers were dying. She could see that the glowing burning embers in the midst of the fire were still dancing with heat and vibrancy. But the lonely embers sitting on the edge of the fire were losing their color—their light and life. ‘This fire is like the Church,’ explained the mother. “The burning embers are like each one of us. When we gather together in community, we glow with fire and life, like all the embers in the middle of the fire. But when we are pulled apart, we start to fade, and individually, to die.”

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, pps. 2-6.

<sup>2</sup> Synthesis, Year C, Day of Pentecost – Postscript, May 15, 2016.