

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
June 7, 2020

## **On the Way to Unity**

Acts 2:1-13

"Weird Babel of Tongues." That was the title of a story on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* on April 18, 1906. The reporter was trying to describe what would soon be known as the Azusa Street Revival. It's considered the beginning of the Pentecostal movement. The reporter's story began, "Breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand, the newest religious sect has started in Los Angeles."<sup>1</sup>

Another author has described the event this way:

In 1906, the Spirit of God was poured out in a powerful revival in Los Angeles that has come to be known as the Azusa Street Revival. Under the leadership of an African American man, William Seymour, tens of thousands of people from all over the world and all walks of life—rich, poor, men, women, Americans, non-Americans, black, white, Asian, Latino—came by car, by horse and buggy, by train and by boat. They all encountered the Spirit. In a year of lynchings, blacks and whites were embracing each other as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Frank Bartleman, a historian of the Azusa Street Revival, said, "The color line is washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ!"<sup>2</sup>

And yet, in many ways the color line still seems to be there as much as ever. How striking that at a time of the year when Christians remember and reflect on the coming of the Holy Spirit, the life-giving breath of God, our picture of Pentecost sits alongside mental images of George Floyd lying on the ground, saying, "I can't breathe," while Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneels down on Floyd's neck. Outrage over Floyd's death, and anger over America's long history of racial inequality, has spilled into the streets of our nation's cities this past week, including Washington, DC.

And all this, as I said, at a time when followers of Jesus recall how our spiritual ancestors spilled into the streets of Jerusalem, overflowing with the power of the Holy Spirit and declaring what God had done through the death and resurrection of the Messiah. News reporters rushed to the scene. Bystanders, along with those watching from home, weren't sure what to make of this outburst of religious expression. Some concluded that the disciples were just drunk.

But others knew this wasn't a case of inebriation. They at least recognized that these street preachers were speaking their language, literally. These were Jews who had made the journey from other territories to participate in a harvest festival that took place fifty days after Passover. The whole household of Israel gathered to celebrate the goodness of God toward their nation. Though they were all Jewish, they spoke different languages, depending on the region where they lived. In our text, Luke emphasizes this by giving us a "list of nations" (vv. 9-10). So he's not describing an experience of speaking in tongues, which is highlighted in other parts of the New Testament. Rather, this is a case of the Holy Spirit enabling Jesus' followers to voice the gospel in different languages, as well as enabling the hearers to comprehend the good news in their native tongue.

When we remember Pentecost, we remember the boundary-breaking, color-line-crossing power of the Holy Spirit. And we not only remember it, we also participate in it. As I stressed in last week's sermon, we need to prayerfully make room for the Spirit to fill us, individually and together, so that we can bear witness to our Lord's ongoing work of uniting a divided world. Prayerfulness and worship keep us open and receptive to a presence and a power beyond ourselves, the presence and power of the God who has reconciled us to himself and to one another through Jesus Christ.

David Fitch tells about hearing Charles Galbreath, a pastor at Clarendon Road Church in Brooklyn, tell the story of a black man who had been gunned down by police in his neighborhood. According to Fitch,

. . . Anger seethed in the neighborhood. Frustration from years of racial oppression was about to erupt in violence. Many people lined up to march down the main street while police gathered, expecting violence.

Charles and a group of pastors rushed to the gathering place and found themselves caught in the middle between the police and the people. Tensions were rising. Insults were being hurled across the divide. One side picked up rocks, the other side clutched their guns. The pastors feared for their lives; bullets could fly at any moment.

Galbreath said that some of the pastors spontaneously walked into the middle of the street between the two warring parties, bowed their heads, and started to pray. They implored God to visit this place. As Charles tells it, slowly the tension died down, the people put down the rocks, and the police took their hands off their holsters. Those who cared stayed. And without a shot fired or rock thrown, conversations began and God's presence appeared that night in that community. It was the beginning of something new God was doing to bring justice and reconciliation to a street corner.<sup>3</sup>

The lasting peace and justice that we need, in our hearts, our nation, and our world, cannot come without the presence and power of God, in and through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to recognize sin, in ourselves and in society. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to see our unrighteous attitudes and actions in the form of racial bias, stereotyping, a sense of superiority, or apathy toward the injustices and sufferings that others have endured, particularly minorities and people of color. The Holy Spirit is the one who calls us to repentance and reform, at a personal and a social level. The Holy Spirit is the one who sensitizes us to be able to listen to the stories of people whose experiences have been very different from our own. The Holy Spirit is the one who fills us with the life of the Lord Jesus, so that we know how to address inequities and injustices, through the statements we make and the action we take.

The bottom line is that as Christians, prayerfulness and the power of the Holy Spirit don't remove us from the world but send us into it, as witnesses to what God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Too often, the Holy Spirit is misunderstood as a very abstract, theoretical, or invisible kind of thing. But in fact it's one of the most practical, down-to-earth parts of our faith. The story of Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the one who moves God's people out of the sanctuary and into the streets with the good news of redemption and hope. The Holy Spirit won't let us settle for being pray-ers but not practitioners. We have to go public with the gospel, through what we say and what we do. After all, public statements, without practical strategies, are hollow. Declarations, without deeds, leave problems unaddressed and lives untouched.

John Perkins is an African American evangelical Christian and civil rights leader. He was once nearly beaten to death in Mississippi for his work defending the rights of poor blacks. Paul Louis Metzger tells about driving Perkins to a benefit dinner where he was to be the keynote speaker, helping raise money for an inner-city community development ministry. As they drove along, Metzger asked Perkins what it was like for him now in Mississippi. He

replied matter-of-factly, "I'm kind of a hero now in Mississippi. It seems that every time the state newspapers write something about reconciliation, they quote me. It's as if I created the word. But when I think about how many homes my fame has built for the poor in Mississippi, I realize that my fame hasn't built any homes for the poor. So, I don't put no stock in my fame."<sup>4</sup>

Perkins' humility challenges us to consider the source of our power and the object of our praise. Our goal isn't to bring glory to our own names or to the name of Grace Baptist Church, but to be instruments through which God's kingdom takes shape in this divided world, in concrete, practical ways, especially in the lives of the marginalized and oppressed. Like those first followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, what we want is for God to take what's wrong in the world and make it right. We want the Lordship of Jesus to be fully unveiled. We want the gospel to advance. Especially in times like these, when a pandemic still threatens and violence erupts in the streets, we need to remember that the gospel is still true, the kingdom of God can't be stopped, and we're still equipped with power from on high.

The story of Pentecost is the story of a beginning, a start. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:14). At Pentecost, we're still in Jerusalem, and the gospel is being proclaimed primarily to Jews. As Luke continues to unfold the story of the church, the word of God expands into new territory, and Gentiles get brought into the household of God. "The ends of the earth" is more than just a place on the map. It's a promise that the church is to be a community formed by the breaking down of barriers and the crossing of lines, especially race, nationality, and ethnicity. In other words, the church is God's visible protest against the conflicts and divisions that plague humankind.

And what started at Pentecost is still not done. We're still on the way to unity in Christ. We're still waiting for and living toward the full arrival of God's reign of justice and peace. Our congregation, together with all people everywhere who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, are created by God to be a sign of his ultimate will for the world. In the midst of the strife and turmoil of the past two weeks, it would be great if we could be assembled in God's house today, beside one another in the pews, across lines of race, to mourn with one another, to encourage one another, to pray with one another, and to hope with one another. But the circumstances around the coronavirus pandemic keep us from doing that right now. Even so, be assured that the unity we have in Christ is still intact. We'll be reunited, and the reconciling purposes of God will prevail.

Earlier this week, minister Esau McCaulley wrote a powerful piece titled, "A Nation on Fire Needs the Flames of the Spirit." I want to close this message by leaving you with his words. McCaulley says:

We the American church have a message for a country and a world on fire: There is a God who loves you and died that you might know him. This love is sufficient to gather the divided peoples of the world, even when all the politicians and philosophers fail. There is a God of justice who sees and acts on behalf of the beleaguered peoples of the world, people like George Floyd. There is a king and kingdom. And he has given us his Spirit to make him known to the ends of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ted Olsen, "American Pentecost." Christianity Today website. Accessed June 3, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-58/american-pentecost.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Rich Nathan, *Both-And* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) 48.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from David Fitch, *Seven Principles for the Church on Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Praxis) 124-125.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, *The Gospel of John* (Downers Grove: IVP 2010) 50-51.

<sup>5</sup> Esau McCaulley, "A Nation on Fire Needs the Flames of the Spirit." Christianity Today website. June 1, 2020. Accessed June 4, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/june-web-only/george-floyd-protests-racism-nation-on-fire-needs-spirit.html>>.