

Tongues of Fire
First UMC of Pocatello
Pentecost
June 5, 2022

Romans 8:14-17; Acts 2:1-13

The promise of Pentecost is two-fold: First, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for every person to hear the message of God's love in a way that they can truly receive and comprehend. While the message of the Spirit is singular – Christ has saved us – the tongues of the Spirit are as countless as the hearts that hear. The other side of this promise is that every person, once certain of God's love for them, is gifted – often to their surprise – with a language for communicating that same love to someone else. When God's breath fills us, our tongues catch fire. These two promises – that all can hear, that all can speak – are united in the words of that perplexed crowd in Jerusalem: “in our *own* languages we hear *them* speaking about God's deeds of power” (Acts 2:11).

Is there anything more desirable than hearing the good news of God's love spoken in your native language, your heart language? Is there anything more exhilarating than finding yourself pushed into relationships with others to whom you are suddenly able to communicate, beyond your understanding or natural giftedness? This is the joy and the adventure of the Spirit-filled life.

The creative combination of wind and fire in the Pentecost story shows us that the fire of the tongue, the gift of proclamation, must be continually stirred up by the breath of God, like coals which, when blown upon, catch fire once again. Breathing in Spirit, breathing out the Spirit, breath warmed by the assurance of love – we speak.

Paul testifies to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit when he says, “When we cry, *Abba! Father!* it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). Yet even in this verse there is an acknowledgment of the connection between what we might call an inner voice and an outer voice. For *Abba* is an Aramaic word; at the time, Aramaic was the language of the common person in Palestine, the language of the home, of casual and intimate conversation. *Pater* is a Greek word, the language of the Greco-Roman empire, the language of economic, political, and philosophical discourse. With *Abba!* Paul is

witnessing to how the Spirit speaks to his own heart; with *pater*, he is casting a wider net, translating the love of God into a language that, he hopes, will reach more people in more places.

So, the inner witness is planted by an outer witness, the inner voice conditioned by external voices. For this reason, there must be those who speak of love; there must be tongues of fire. The tongue of fire is a sign both of the love that burns within us and of our vocation. We *speak*. We speak in languages awakened by the Holy Spirit. We speak not necessarily in our own familiar language, but in the language of someone else out there in the world. We cross boundaries, borders between the familiar and the foreign through the Spirit-given gift of communication.

So, friends, to whom has God given you the power to speak? What language has been birthed within you? Maybe to your surprise, whose lives do you find yourself able to speak into?

The Pentecost story highlights the spoken languages of historical circumstance, of ethnic and national origin. *Parthians, Medes, Elamites; Cretans, and Arabs; residents of Egypt; parts of Libya.* The speakers of these languages were *already there* in the city of Jerusalem; they were the apostles' neighbors. They did not represent a far-flung mission field but a local community. And because there is nothing like hearing about God's love in your mother tongue, in the language of your heart, God did not say to the disciples, "Go gather in the nations and teach them Aramaic or Greek" but "Go speak to your neighbors in *their* language, go join them in *their* homes, go submit yourselves to *their* ways of being – and make my love known." I bet we're invited into the patient, painstaking work of learning other languages more often than we sense or admit.

And there are also the languages of experience. How do you speak in the key of grief? How do you make meaningful contact with a child? How do you share Christ's love to someone who has seen war, who lies in a hospital bed, whose worldview is falling apart? How do you speak to the incarcerated parent, to the struggling addict? To the anxious teenager, to the elderly widow? It is possible, through the Spirit, to receive a language for touching lives very different from your own. All it takes is a sensitivity to your own experience and a dependence upon our communion-creating God.

Whatever language is given by the Spirit to bind us to another person or community, it is typically not of our own choosing. No, the language, the neighbors, choose us. It seems pretty clear that Peter and the apostles didn't draw

the languages of the known world out of a hat. They didn't even know what the first sign of the Holy Spirit would be! They simply waited in prayer. When God gave each of them a tongue of fire, they were as surprised as the cosmopolitan crowd. Yet it was, it is, the perfect gift – *to be loved in a way you understand, to be made capable of loving beyond your understanding.*

It was asked of the apostles, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” How do these backwater nobodies know our language? Where'd they learn to connect and commune with us? May God's Spirit fall upon *us* with such power that we hear many languages spoken in and from this place. May it be said of us, “Are not all these who are speaking Pocatellans? Where'd they learn to speak my language – to touch my heart? How does this church speak love in so many registers and dialects?”

And may our answer be: Because we are a people whose own hearts have been set aflame by the testimony of the indwelling Spirit, and God has led us to you.

To whom has God given *you* the power to speak?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.