

Spotlight on the first church: Broken speech
Acts 2:1-21
A sermon preached for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
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When the automobile was invented in this country, Henry Ford said, "You can have this fine automobile in any color, as long as it's black."

When McDonalds spread their restaurant chain around the world, it offered "2 all-beef patties, special sauce on a sesame seed bun." The Big Mac fed the world.

When the Republicans and Democrats come together this fall for the Presidential election, they will offer one answer: 2 old men for our highest office in the nation.

Pentecost gives us the key to living in a world that is becoming more different and more alike at the same time.

We live in a time when never before has it been so easy to be in direct contact with people from all over the globe. Uplinks, downlinks, e-mail, tele-conferences, Internet, bulletin boards all these various electronic pit stops (and sometimes potholes) on the information highway offer people the chance to interact and interconnect in a nanosecond. In ways we have yet to comprehend, the "global village" has become a reality right under our noses and right at our fingertips.

At the same time we are more divided than ever. I can divide this room by mentioning one hot-button issues. The room would divide over who's in favor and who's against. I can cause division by simply bringing up the issue of gun ownership.

When Luke describes the moment when the Holy Spirit descended, he notes that "divided tongues, as of fire" appeared and that "a tongue rested on each of them." The Holy Spirit didn't explode like some massive fireball, rolling over and consuming every-thing it touched. Rather, the Holy Spirit systematically differentiated itself breaking itself into separate "tongues." Each of these distinct manifestations, these separate licks of flame, then settled on and chose a unique individual upon which to rest.

Each disciple received a different flame of that Spirit and each disciple began to speak in a different language, until voice was given to all the tribes of the earth. One message given in broken speech. Those witnessing this phenomenon heard and testified, all these different languages were proclaiming the same message "God's deeds of power" (v.11).

But we are not fluent in this Pentecost. We are still broken people living in a broken world. We are still bruised and battered people living in a bruised and battered world. Some of our wounds

will never heal. Some of us will limp for a lifetime. But the very brokenness of our language is the “mother tongue” for others who listen to us.

Have you ever heard of “broken English?” Did you know “broken English” is an actual language? North Carolina Judge Jesse Caldwell tells the story of Vietnamese woman who was waiting her turn to be examined in a crowded hospital emergency room. She gradually became aware of a frustrating “non-conversation” being attempted a few seats down. A nurse was trying to ask a new patient for some details on her illness. The patient spoke Spanish. The nurse did not. The Vietnamese woman listened for a minute then realized that while she didn’t speak Spanish she did understand the broken-English bits and phrases the Spanish speaking patient offered as answers. Because of her own experience of learning to communicate in “broken English,” the Vietnamese woman could hear the heart and gist of what this other woman was trying to say. The Vietnamese woman offered to “translate” the broken English of the Spanish speaker into something the nurse could understand. She was so successful at bridging the brokenness of their languages that eventually the Vietnamese woman was hired by the hospital as a kind of generic translator. Brokenness was the common language spoken by all hospital patients.

The Holy Spirit speaks through broken people to a broken world, using language every broken heart can hear and understand.

- Because we know what it is like to be broken by hatred, we can speak of the healing love of Christ’s sacrifice.
- Because we know what it is like to be broken by despair, we can speak of the healing hope of Christ’s forgiveness.
- Because we know what it is like to be broken by doubt, we can speak of the healing faith in Christ’s promises. Because we know what it is like to break down doing church — program church, purpose-driven church, seeker-sensitive church, organic church, missional church, NCD church, simple church, we can stop doing church and start doing Pentecost.

The church of Jesus Christ is alive and well. In fact, Christianity is still the fastest growing religion in the world. But it’s growing not in the North and West, but in the South and East. Why the difference? Why is Christianity surging in the South and East and not in North America and Europe?

Because where the body of Christ is growing the people aren’t trying to do church. They’re doing Pentecost. Maybe it’s time for us as a church to stop relying on our own powers and programs, our blueprints and boilerplates, and start doing what these early disciples did: trust the Spirit and do Pentecost.

- When we do church, we’re concerned about our protection and position in the church
- When we do Pentecost, we’re concerned about being out there in the world “hid with Christ in God.”
- When we do church, we’re concerned about decency and order.
- When we do Pentecost, we’re concerned about fire and glory.

- When we do church, we want God in a box;
- When we do Pentecost, we want God to show us the way.

- When we do church, we wear out our lives maintaining an institution.
- When we do Pentecost, we set ourselves on fire, blow up evil, and our lives are spent setting off the gospel-dynamite of spirit and fire.

- When we do church, we worry over human dreams, schemes and appointments;
- When we do Pentecost, we worry over divine anointings.

- When we do church, it's all about human functions;
- When we do Pentecost, it's all about divine interventions.

- When we do church, we're organizing;
- When we do Pentecost, we're agonizing . . . over a world God loved so much Jesus came to die for it.

It's Pentecost Sunday. Let's DO PENTECOST with our broken speech. It's time the world heard some different sounds . . . the sounds of eternal significance.