

“Many Tongues, One Spirit”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
June 12, 2011

Acts 2:1-21 Sermon
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
For Private Distribution Only

So here we are. The day of Pentecost has come. And we are all together in one place. We have recalled the events of that day: the rush of the wind, the divided tongues of fire, resting upon the head of each disciple, the many different languages miraculously spoken and understood. We have celebrated the Spirit’s arrival and the birth of the Church so many years ago. And now we are left to wonder what it means for us this day: in a very different age and place, in a very different Church.

Pentecost was originally a *Jewish* festival. First referred to as the “Feast of Harvest” and later as the “Feast of Weeks,” the day celebrated the law and marked the conclusion of a 7-week agricultural season 50 days after Passover. Originally it was a sacrificial presentation of the first fruits of the harvest to God. By Jesus’ time, the holiday had taken on the more festive tone of a communal meal to which the poor were invited. On this same day, 50 days or 7 weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples experienced a different sort of harvest, as the Holy Spirit and her gifts descended upon them for the first time, uniting them in understanding and growing their ranks by 3000 people. Originally Jesus’ ascension was marked on this same day. But some time in the 4th or 5th Century the Ascension moved to 40 days after Easter.

According to Harvard scholar Diana Eck, in the medieval church Pentecost was one of the most unique and creatively celebrated days on the church calendar. In 10th-century Rome, the Pentecost liturgy involved not only anthems, but church architecture. For the heavenly scenes painted on the domed and soaring ceilings of so many cathedrals served not only to inspire and transport the congregation. They also disguised trap doors, small openings drilled through

cathedral ceilings to their rooftops. At the appropriate moment during the Pentecost mass, servants would ascend the rooftop to release live doves through these holes. From out of the painted skies and clouds, swooping, diving symbols of a vitally present Holy Spirit would descend toward the people below. Simultaneously, choirboys would break into the whooshing and drumming sound of a windstorm. And, finally, as doves flew and winds rushed, bushels of rose petals would shower down upon the congregation like red, flickering tongues of flame...

For now obvious reasons, they called those trap doors "Holy Spirit holes." Today we tend to think that Hollywood is the be-all and end-all when it comes to special effects, but I personally am not so sure. *Particularly* if we put ourselves in the medieval context and imagine how this event would have been received in the course of otherwise hard-bitten lives. Imagine how close and involved each person must have felt in receiving the gifts, the movement, and the beauty of the Holy Spirit through all of their senses. Can we imagine that same kind of Spirit-breathing, breathtaking power and vitality blowing down from the ceiling of our little church today? Can the Holy Spirit get through our attic and this ceiling to find her way into our sanctuary?¹ For that matter, do we want her to?

From where we sit, it is especially challenging to put ourselves in the shoes of either 1st Century or medieval Christians. In this big, English-speaking nation of ours, we don't deal with much linguistic diversity. And so the slightest hint of linguistic difference tends to irritate us. We expect everyone to know and speak *our* language and in an accent we can comprehend. And not just here at home. Many an American tourist has expressed similar expectations abroad. And to a large extent, the world has obliged. Meanwhile, many of us have allowed cobwebs to form over

¹ Eck, Diana: *Encountering God*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

the foreign languages we learned in our younger years. This has been our prerogative as a virtual island of a superpower, though it may not always be so or for very much longer.

Nevertheless, I would invite you to consider that our languages are far more complicated and nuanced than that. Even though all of us here speak American English, there are not only regional dialects and generational slang to contend with, but many different styles and modes of communication. Pieces which can vary not only from state to state, but from city to city, from profession to profession, from family to family, and even from individual to individual. I remember how confused I was when I first arrived in Cadillac early last year and found myself immersed in an alphabet soup of acronyms--DEQ, DNRE, ISD, CAPS... Unlike you, I spoke the jargon of bookselling--S & S, B & N, PW, and BGI. I had zero idea what you were saying to me then. I was in my own personal Babel. Now, almost 15 months later, the tower has fallen, and I am ready for you to throw your best acronym at me for an educated guess!

But even now I wonder, beyond the literal words, do we *really* and truly comprehend one another? Can we read the tones of one another's voices or our nonverbal cues? Do we speak to one another openly and directly or siphoned through triangles of people, like a kids' game of telephone? Do you take into account the fact that I am a product of Boston and New York, and so I generally say what I mean with a level of directness more characteristic of the East Coast than the Midwest? That my genetic make-up is Northern European, and so my demeanor is less obviously effusive than those with roots in warmer climes. That on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator I am an INFP--introverted, intuitive, feeling, and perceptive—and so my actions and communications with you are largely shaped by and filtered through these personal lenses, as is my interpretation of your interactions with me. That I am a visual person and a kinesthetic

learner who is primarily moved by visual beauty and programmed to learn by doing. And what about you? What are *your* personal filters and lenses? And how do they affect the ways you relate to one another and to me? We likely share *some* of these qualities, but undoubtedly not all. And so, on some levels, we do in fact speak to one another in foreign tongues.

Well, then there is Gary Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages*, which is widely recommended for couples to help decipher their styles of loving, then learn to express that love to one another in ways that are customized to be personally relevant and affirming. I'm not sure that, collectively as a congregation, we are particularly concentrated in any one of those 5 languages. It seems to me that, as a family in Chapman's world, we are equal parts Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch.² That we use all of these dialects to express our appreciation of one another without necessarily favoring one over another. Yet I imagine there is still plenty of room for variation and thus misinterpretation. And surely this church has decades of unique history and tradition, spoken and unspoken, that could quite literally take newer folks like me years to stumble upon and unpack. And so, even here, a phrase dictionary would come in handy.

When we break it all down like this, it's a wonder we're able to communicate at all, isn't it? And this is only one small church and denomination in the far larger body of Christ. Even more pronounced differences emerge if we extend the metaphor out to our Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Baptist, and other sisters and brothers in Christ.

Some scholars have characterized Pentecost as a perfect bookend to the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis. Which certainly makes a lot of sense. But, 2000 years out, it feels like we have in

²Chapman, Gary: *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*, Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010.

many ways drifted closer to the Babel side of that equation. Celebrating diversity is a good thing. But celebrating unity in diversity is an even better thing. Can we, with the wonder and innocence of children, return to Christianity's infancy? Can we submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit's passion and movement? Can we release ourselves to her gift of masterfully, magically weaving together colorful threads of individuality into beautifully textured tapestries of grace, peace, and understanding? Can we let the doves fly and the winds blow in our pristine sanctuary? Can we let the petals of roses fall softly on our heads and spread the aroma of joy throughout this building? Can we welcome all those who would like to come in and share the doves and the wind and the roses? Can we spill outside these doors to touch those who fear to enter? Can we reach our arms across the street and across town to embrace our theological kin and share the holy kiss of Christian unity?

It is indeed our heritage as the united and uniting denomination. And so I hope we will accept the Spirit's challenge. But first I hope that we will open ourselves to receive her presence, at once warm and comforting and chaotic and exciting. She is here among us today and every day. Let us welcome her with all our senses and in all our many languages.

Amen.