

Acts 2:1-11

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’

1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Today is the Festival of Pentecost, or, literally, “fifty days.” Pentecost is originally the Jewish festival celebrating the beginning of the early wheat harvest, fifty days after the celebration of the beginning of the barley harvest. It’s also called the Feast of Weeks, since fifty days is about seven weeks, a week of weeks.

We Christians celebrate it slightly differently, seven weeks after Easter, because we're celebrating something that happened on Pentecost. Before Jesus ascended to Heaven, he told his followers to stay in Jerusalem until they "have been clothed with power from on high."¹

So they stay in Jerusalem until the Festival of Pentecost. A sound like a mighty wind comes through the room, and they see glimpses of fire over their heads. Each person in the room gained the ability to speak in other languages, so that they could spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

They have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter steps out into the street and preaches one of the most successful conversion sermons ever preached – three thousand people came to Jesus' disciples for baptism and to be told the good news of salvation.

What the Church needed at that time was the ability to communicate with all the people who were in Jerusalem for the festival. I didn't read the whole passage that we usually read about Parthians, Medes, Elamites, et cetera, but it specifies that there were people there from basically every province of the Roman Empire and some places beyond the Empire. There were Middle Easterners there, and Europeans, and Africans, and Turks, and people from further away. People whom we would see as Arabs, Blacks, and White, mostly. Between all of them they probably spoke fifty languages, but each could hear the good news in their own language. Jesus' followers were not only given the ability to speak all these languages, but they were inspired to do it.

¹ Luke 24:49.

That day it didn't matter what color someone's skin was, or where they came from, or what language they spoke. They could all hear the good news of salvation in a language that they understood.

Every single person there was made by God, in the image of God.

Jews. Greeks. Slaves. Free people. Everybody.

Every single person in Columbus in the past few days was made by God, in the image of God.

You. Me. *Them*. Everybody. Everybody!²

God did not invent the concept of race. Human beings did, in order to have an excuse to treat some people better than others. That's why the lines between races have changed over time. In New Testament Judea, Jews were people who primarily spoke Hebrew, the language of Jewish culture and religion. Greeks were people who spoke Greek, the language of international trade and culture. Saint Paul would have called a Black African a Greek, if he spoke Greek and wore a toga.

In America, you may have heard of nineteenth-century signs that said, "No Irish need apply." Southern Europeans, like Spaniards and Greeks and Italians, weren't considered "White" until the twentieth century, unless they were nobility or so rich as to be near nobility. Today, Irish or Greek or Italian people are white, of course. That's not even questioned.

Taken to its extreme, treating people differently according to race leads to slavery. It leads to camps. It leads to genocide.

² Allusion to "Everybody Needs Someone to Love," from *The Blues Brothers* soundtrack, intentional.

If the Church is anything more than a social club, it is part of the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ exists to remind the broken and fearful world we live in that in life and in death, we don't belong to ourselves.

Or our families.

Or even our country.

We belong to God. That person who doesn't look like we do, or dress the way we do, or speak like we do, they belong to God, too. Whether or not they realize or understand that. Whether or not they care.

Part of the good news of salvation is that we are called to love God and love our neighbors. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to stress that that includes people we don't want to include as neighbors. Treating people differently because of what we perceive their race to be, is making their race more important than the command of Jesus Christ.

That is idolatry.

That is sin.

No matter who says it's okay or encourages it.

The Holy Spirit gives us gifts in this world, to help us be the people we are called to be and to do the work of Christ in the world. Paul lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, interpretation of spirits, and languages. In another list, in his letter to a church in modern-day Turkey, he lists things that all of us can learn, and should. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."³

³ Galatians 5:22-23.

These gifts of the Spirit are not given to us solely for our own benefit, or for the benefit of a small group of quote-unquote “our people.” Because we belong to God, God has given us these gifts to do the work of God in the world.

That means listening to people whose voices have been silenced.

That means working for justice. A contemporary philosopher said, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”⁴ That means that a society that does not have justice, does not have love.

As two generations of Presbyterians have confessed, “In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us [everything we need] to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”

That’s scary, but, “With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁵

Thanks be to God.

Amen

⁴ Cornell West.

⁵ The Presbyterian Church (USA), “A Brief Statement of Faith,” in *The Book of Confessions*.