

Gifts of the Spirit

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13

11 May 2008

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church. If Ascension Day is one of my least favorite holy days, then Pentecost is one of my favorite – which might seem strange because it's another story filled with a bunch of supernatural weirdness. A rushing wind, tongues of fire – what in the world is that all about? It's difficult for us to understand it today. What is really going on in this story, and what does it mean? Christmas and Easter are easy enough to understand. Sure, there are layers of deeper meaning that we have yet to fully plumb, but in the simplest form, we can understand a baby being born, and even a dead person coming back to life. But the events of Pentecost are so far beyond our everyday experience. And things are further complicated because there are people today who claim to experience those same mysterious gifts. Modern Pentecostals do speak in tongues, but what about those of us who don't? Does that mean we haven't been baptized by the Holy Spirit? And what does it mean to speak in tongues, anyway? Yet for all its strangeness, Pentecost is one of my favorite holy days because it is the birthday of the church, and it is about the Holy Spirit, and even if I don't quite get it, nevertheless I know that something really important is going on here.

But as I was preparing for this sermon, I found a clue. It may not unlock all the mysteries of Pentecost, but I think it gives a clue to understanding a tiny bit of what all this means. And the clue comes at the beginning of our passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It goes by so fast, we could easily miss it. "I want you to understand," he says, "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, at first glance, this too can seem to be a confusing passage. Who in the world was cursing Jesus in the early church? And at any rate, no one today curses him. Even people who don't like Christianity as a religion tend to have a great deal of respect for Jesus. For that matter, other religions view him very favorably as well. So what does this passage mean? Who would curse Jesus?

Let's project ourselves back to that early church. In those days, no one ever imagined that the Messiah would get crucified. Crucifixion was a horrible way to go, and no one was proud to have a family member or friend go through that. The cross was so emotionally traumatic that it wasn't even depicted in Christian art until a couple of centuries after Christ died. For most in the Roman Empire, the cross meant a curse. The person who died on it might be innocent, but the suffering was so horrible that anyone who was crucified surely was abandoned by justice, by love, and even by God. That person could be seen as cursed, and no one else would want to get near them lest they suffer the same fate. So it is that we see the disciples scatter and go into hiding because they don't want to end up on a cross too. This might be what Paul is talking about here. No one is calling Jesus the man cursed. Rather, they are saying that his fate was cursed: his fate as a victim of violence at the hands of both the government and the religious authorities. To say "Jesus be cursed," is to wish all the tragedy on him and not on us, to distance ourselves from him, to see him as something tainted and we don't want that taint to rub off on us.

In that context then, it truly does take the Holy Spirit, divine inspiration, to be able to look at this murdered man and say, "No, wait a minute. He's not cursed. God didn't abandon him. Rather, because of this man's fate, we know that God is always with us. We are blessed by this crucifixion." It's an insight people wouldn't arrive at on their own. It's an insight that could only be given to them by the inspiring Spirit of God.

And what does this mean today? Again, no one today goes around cursing Jesus, and the cross has even lost its horrifying power. On the contrary, the cross has become an accessory, a piece of jewelry! So what might be the modern equivalent of the point Paul is trying to make here? I think it's when we see other victims of violence and we run and hide like those early disciples. We see them as somehow deserving of their fate, as abandoned by society and by God, and we had better steer clear lest the same misfortune befall us. So we say, "If those welfare moms would just get a job, If those immigrants would just learn English, If those people in New Orleans would have just left the city when they were told to, If those Iraqis really did want freedom," If, if, if, if – that qualifier means that we don't have to be so sympathetic to these people. That "If" means they are different from us, they somehow deserve their fate, and we don't have to really care, just pity them a bit. I think Paul would say that anyone who is so unsympathetic cannot possibly be speaking by the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit would tell us that these people are our sisters and brothers, that their fate is ours. The dividing wall of hostility has been broken down.

Now think about that as we go back to our Pentecost story. Bible scholars say that Pentecost is a reversal of the Tower of Babel story way back in Genesis. We know that story, how the people of the world came together and built a great city and wanted to build a mighty tower, but God scrambled their language and scattered them. Now why would God do that? What's wrong with cities, or even towers for that matter? But if you know a bit about your Bible history, you know that the city and the tower were typical of one of the first global empires, the Babylonians. The Babylonians conquered many diverse peoples and tried to make them all be like the Babylonians, by carrying people off to live in different cities, making them all speak the Babylonian language and abandon their own culture for Babylonian ways. In other words, the Babylonian empire sought to create unity by squelching diversity. And we all know of societies to this day who do the same thing. The FLDS seeks unity by eliminating anyone who questions their ways. The US in World War II, when German-Americans were pressured to stop speaking German, even to change the spelling of their names, and Japanese-Americans were rounded up and sent off to detention camps. Some degree of conformity, like a military uniform, is okay. But when all diversity is squashed, when differences are feared, what happens is that we cease to listen to one another. We cease to truly hear one another, and then we might as well be speaking different languages.

The fate of modern Yugoslavia is a perfect example. In the Soviet days, Yugoslavia was the most peaceful and prosperous of the Soviet republics. That region of the world had been plagued by violence for centuries, but under the Soviet regime they managed not only to live but to thrive in peace. But as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, we saw how fragile that unity was. Yugoslavia dissolved into fighting factions and erupted in brutal, violent bloodshed against their next-door neighbors. And even the language itself was shattered. Serbian and Croatian are now seen as two separate languages, even though the differences between them are no greater than the differences between Canadian English and American English. It's not that the language has changed; what changed is that people stopped talking to one another. More importantly, they stopped listening. That's how it could happen that people who had lived with each other for seventy years in peace, could now turn on one another and murder each other in their beds. They said to one another, "You are cursed!" Whereas if they had been inspired by the Holy Spirit, they would have said, "You are my brothers and sisters."

So if the Babel story in the Bible represents our desire to achieve unity by stamping out diversity, a perversion that results in us no longer able to talk together or understand one another, a perversion that ironically scatters us, then Pentecost represents the reversal of that story. Just one chapter earlier, the disciples had been asking Jesus when Israel would be restored. Now the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem, where countless Jews who had been scattered across the known world had returned. All these Jews spoke a variety of different languages, but when the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples on that day, they start speaking not in tongues, not the incomprehensible language of angels, but in the real languages of everyone who was listening. Notice what did not happen: it wasn't that all these different people suddenly

understood Aramaic. It's that the disciples now started speaking in a way that everyone who heard them could understand. Now the Jews who had been scattered around the world indeed were restored into a united Israel, but it wasn't a unity achieved through conformity. It's a unity that was achieved through diversity, where all differences are celebrated. Our differences do not separate us. Rather our differences become something we can share.

And how can this be? This is where we go back to Paul's wonderful discourse about spiritual gifts. That temptation for conformity is strong, and some people in the early church were saying that some gifts were better than others, and maybe some gifts aren't really gifts at all. Everyone should be more the same, say and do the same things in the same way.

But Paul said no! We need diversity! There are varieties of gifts, he said, but the same Spirit gives them. The body is made up of many parts, and we need every single one of those parts in order to function at our best. The eye can't say to the hand, "I have no need of you." The foot can't say to the ear, "You're different than me, so you must be inferior." No part of the body can say to another part, "You are cursed!" because to do so would be to curse yourself. Rather the Holy Spirit leads all the parts to say, "Jesus is Lord, and we all serve that Lord together in our own way!" The Holy Spirit empowers us to come together not in spite of but because of our differences. The Holy Spirit unites us into one body, where all our differences are not only respected, not only needed, but are honored!