

## "A New Language"

Acts 2:1-21  
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### Pentecost

Is the Spirit of God alive and well? Is the Spirit of God moving in the church and in the world today? Is the Spirit of God moving in your life, and what evidence do you have to show for it?

In a way, these are mostly rhetorical questions, because I firmly believe that the Spirit is always moving—that God is always active and present in our lives and therefore in the life of the world. It's just that at certain times, times like these, for example, when we seem so divided as a nation and uncertain as a world, that it's hard to see much evidence of that.

To a large extent I think it's because unlike it was in today's text, where the Spirit moved with power and force, the real work of the Spirit is, more often than not, quiet and elusive—gentle even, whereas the loud, rushing violent winds today tend to be coming from those forces that are at work unsettling and destabilizing things.

I don't think it's an overstatement to say that we are experiencing a crisis of identity in America, these days. And what works very effectively in times like these, is the language of fear and anxiety. Language of suspicion and fear of "the other," the foreigner. Those who, you know, are not "real" Americans.

Let's take our country back—a phrase, by the way, that can only be uttered with integrity by Native Americans. But you know the kind of language we've become all too accustomed to hearing.

They are taking away our jobs.

Whatever happened to the good old days?

America first.

America: Love it or leave it!

Or, as one of the Seven Commandments of Animalism in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "Four legs good, two legs bad."

If you're not for us, you're against us.

Language like that is hardly a way to unite the country and bring people who otherwise differ together. And as people of faith, we must never normalize or excuse the language of lying or the language of bigotry and hate speech. To do so is to betray the very gospel of Jesus Christ, who said "I am the way, the truth and the life."

In this age of social media, instant communication and 24 hour news cycles, people are really starting to study and analyze how we go about forming our opinions. And they are finding that we don't begin with facts, but with a set of basic assumptions.

And if, as information comes at us, we decide based on those assumptions what we will even consider as plausible, we run the risk of creating our own truth based on our assumptions. And so if you are inclined to be anxious and fearful, then a steady bombardment of "us verses them" messaging, is likely to reinforce and solidify your fears.

Sociologists and psychologists are talking these days about an honor culture in America. It is the belief, the feeling that foreign countries are doing better than the United States, and that this makes our country look weak.

In a new book entitled, *Honor Bound*, social psychologist Ryan Brown, reveals a list of states, ranked in order of how concerned their residents' are about America's perceived weaknesses, and therefore their desire to retaliate against those weaknesses. The top ten states are,

South Carolina,  
North Carolina,  
Alabama,  
Georgia,  
Arkansas,  
Mississippi,  
West Virginia,  
Virginia,  
Tennessee  
and Texas.

States known largely for their boastful and reactionary expressions of Christianity, among other things.

The language of fear and anxiety used to prey on the already vulnerable; the language of division and contempt, the language of deception and blatant lies, cannot in any way be considered language of the Spirit. It simply cannot be considered language that is influenced, guided or blessed by the Spirit of God.

Which gets us to this great and familiar Pentecost passage in Acts. You know the scene. All those different people, from all those different places, bringing with them their distinctive languages and customs, their unique forms of dress, their histories and their national heritage and pride—brining the very essence of who they were, and gathering with others in one place.

What could possibly go wrong there? Well, a lot could have gone wrong. Ancient grudges against neighbors could have become the focus. Nationalistic pride could have gotten in the way of the collective good. There was plenty that could have gone wrong.

Except that when they were all together, when they all made the effort to travel, to sacrifice, to put themselves out and make concerted efforts in order to be there, to show up and to gather with others who were not like themselves—when they did all those things, the Spirit moved.

Tongues of fire fell from heaven and rested upon each of them. They began speaking in new and different languages. And those whom they could never have understood before, were suddenly, somehow, understood as if they were speaking in the individual mother tongues of the others. It happened when they were intentional about being present with and for one another.

And so here is the conclusion I'm left with as I read again this familiar Pentecost passage today, during this particular time in our national life.

When the Spirit is really moving in us and among us, we will speak a new language. We will not be able to do otherwise. Our tone will be different, our inflections will be more nuanced because we will be taking others into consideration. We will be concerned with what they hear us saying—with how they hear us sounding.

Because this new language will be the language of love and grace. Therefore, it will be language that is respectful of others. It will not strike the familiar, old, stale notes of fear and division. A new, Spirit-filled language will never promote lies as truth. We will remember that this Bible of ours has plenty to say about the treatment of the "strangers within our gates," so that when the Spirit is moving in us, we will understand others and not demonize them or discriminate against them or marginalize them.

But in order for us to begin speaking a new language, we must cultivate a deeper sense of the Spirit within us, as individuals and as a church. Look, we can't control the pervading narratives out there. But what we must do, as people of faith, is refuse to join the chorus of fear and paranoia, refuse to foster and promote unfounded and unsubstantiated rumors as gospel. To travel throughout this life accompanied by the Spirit, requires that each of us develops and improves our language skills.

At the end of the day, and for Christians, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. Some mark it as the beginning of the Christian church. But here is what we, as the church today, need to know: when the Spirit came and moved powerfully among the people, a new language was spoken and new channels of understanding were opened up. And people very different from one another heard each other's voices and understood one another so well, it made them realize that despite their differences, they were one.

It's why scripture says that one day, they will come, from every corner and every region on the face of the earth, and sit at table.

Amen.