

EQUIPPED AND EMPOWERED

A SERMON FOR PENTECOST  
SUNDAY, MAY 19, 2013  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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ACTS 2:1-21

We Presbyterians don't handle the Holy Spirit well. We don't deal well with Pentecost. We're reserved, restrained, controlled, described as God's frozen people. We're cool. And that's all right.

Pentecost is all about fire and wind. It is all about change. It is about people bursting out in tongues of fire, and speaking in other tongues.

And like our children's moment, they were all speaking at the same time; all give testimony and telling the stories of the mighty acts of God.

It was surely something to hear and something to see.

The world had not seen anything like it before, and I daresay has not seen anything like it again.

Oh, some of the Pentecostal churches try to emulate the excitement, the fire, the cacophony of the day, but it is a poor imitation at best.

For you see, what happened on that Day of Pentecost in the year that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, descend into hell, rose up from the dead, was seen by witnesses to be alive, and then ascended into heaven, what happened on that fiftieth day after Passover, was unique.

The saints gathered there in the upper room, that little band of faithful followers of Jesus, maybe fifty, maybe as many as a hundred, maybe a few more, they were equipped and empowered to take the good news of the gospel, the story of the mighty acts of God, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, the hope of the resurrection from the dead and the life everlasting, into all the world.

Jesus had given them the Great Commission on the day He ascended into heaven. He had told them to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that he had commanded.

That Great Commission is still the marching orders for the church today. And the church is growing in the world today, disciples are being made, baptisms are taking place, and folks are being taught everything that Jesus commanded.

But the greatest era of church growth, the greatest century of the spread of the Christian faith was that first century, and what happened on the day of Pentecost explains why that was so.

On that day, the saints, the disciples, were equipped and empowered for mission, for ministry, for the work that was ahead of them.

Unlike some of our modern Pentecostal churches, the people in that upper room did not speak in unknown tongues. They had no need of an interpreter. They proclaimed the mighty acts of

God in an amazing array of languages. They were each given a gift, and that gift was to be able to preach, to teach, to communicate, in a language not their own.

I wonder, how many of us can speak a second language. I've studied, let's see, six languages, and read in a couple of others, but I'm only fluent in English. I can whisper to horses, but they've really got to be listening!

If I were parachuted into a foreign country as a missionary, the first thing I'd have to find is an interpreter.

My friend Ted Lewis goes to Thailand every year, and leads workshops, and speaks to hundreds, maybe even thousands of church leaders. Ted does not speak Thai, and so he has to have someone interpret everything he says. I acted as an interpreter for Ted several years ago when he was selling some horses to a wealthy Russian. Not that I could speak Russian, but the Russians couldn't understand Ted's low country south Georgia drawl, and so I translated that into English for them! Obviously, his interpreter in Thailand is doing a great job, because they keep asking him back.

I've preached to a Brazilian congregation, a new church development, a mission, in Naples, Florida. I had an interpreter, and he had a copy of my sermon manuscript. I would pause at the end of each sentence, and he would translate. Sometimes, I'd say 25 words, and then he'd say two or three. Other times, I'd say a word or two, and he'd talk for a minute. I think I'd have done better to have handed him my sermon and said, "Here, read this to them!" But they did laugh at most of my jokes, so some translation was taking place.

What a wonderful gift to be given, the gift of a language. It took me three years to get credit for two years of French at the University of Tennessee, and I can barely read the menu in a fancy restaurant. Imagine being able to go to a strange land, and not only speak the language, but understand what was being said around you.

One of my fellow ministers was working with a Korean church once. He said that whenever they started speaking Korean, he knew they were talking about something they didn't want him to know!

My late friends Stanley and Ruth Smathers went to Taiwan as missionaries many years ago. They only stayed one term, because they could not master the language.

We still send out missionaries into all the world, and we still send them to language school.

We'd like to think that English is the universal language, and that one can travel anywhere in the world and find someone who can understand what we are saying, but it isn't true.

At the time of Christ, Rome ruled the world, but not everyone spoke or read Latin. In fact, Greek was more widely spoken. These disciples gathered in the upper room spoke Aramaic. They probably could read a little Hebrew, and maybe a little Latin, and maybe understood a little Greek. Remember that Pontius Pilate had the inscription on the cross written in three languages, so that all who passed by might be able to know that Jesus was the King of the Jews.

Understanding another language isn't nearly as important in Jackson County as it is in DeSoto County, where I'll be spending this week. There, approximately a third of the population is

Hispanic. But that's not just the south end of Florida. Our youth will be going to Montreat in a couple of weeks. The last time I was at Montreat, I had to take a plane home for a funeral. I got off on the wrong exit going to the air port, and I stopped at a group of men working by the side of the road to ask for directions. They were all Latinos. Not a one of them spoke English. I finally communicated "aeroporto", and made flying motions, and they smiled and shrugged, and I got the message that none of them had ever been there and that they didn't know how to find it either!

On the day of Pentecost, those disciples in that upper room were equipped to go out into the world, and preach, and teach, and baptize. But more importantly, they were empowered. All the equipment in the world won't get the job done if there is no power.

Think not? Let the battery go dead on your weed-eater. Let your lawn mower run out of gas. Unplug your television. All that equipment, and without power, nothing gets done.

Dear friends, as we look at the future of the church, not just the future of First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida, not just the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), WE SEE PEOPLE WHO MUST BE EQUIPPED AND EMPOWERED FOR SERVICE, FOR MINISTRY, FOR MISSION.

PART OF OUR TASK AS THE CHURCH IS TO EQUIP THE SAINTS, TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION. IT IS ALSO OUR TASK TO EMPOWER THEM. WE EMPOWER THEM WITH OUR PRAYERS, WITH OUR SUPPORT, WITH OUR ENCOURAGEMENT. WE CANNOT SEND THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON THEM, AS GOD DID ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST, BUT WE CAN SEND OUR PRAYERS WITH THEM WHEREVER THEY GO IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST. THE MONETARY GIFTS WE GIVE IN THEIR SUPPORT ALLOW THEM TO BE EQUIPPED AND EMPOWERED FOR SERVICE.

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TODAY IS ANOTHER DAY OF PENTECOST, AND I CANNOT DISAGREE.

LORD, SEND YOUR SPIRIT UPON US, TO EMPOWER US TO USE THE EQUIPMENT WE HAVE IN YOUR MISSION, IN YOUR MINISTRY, IN YOUR SERVICE. EQUIP US WHERE WE NEED IT, EMPOWER US AS YOU WILL, AND IMPLENENT US WHERE YOU CAN USE US BEST, IN JESUS NAME WE PRAY. AMEN.