

GOODNESS, GRACIOUS, GREAT BALLS OF FIRE!

A SERMON FOR PENTECOST
SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2015
First Presbyterian Church of Marianna
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

ACTS 2: 1-21

We Presbyterians wrestle with the Holy Spirit. We don't know quite what to do with it. Half the time, in our creeds and in the words we sing every Sunday, we call it the Holy Ghost, and since we don't believe in ghosts, that puts us in a contradictory position.

The Westminster Divines, who wrote the confession of faith that was the foundation stone of American Presbyterianism, neglected to write a chapter about the Holy Spirit. While the Confession was written in 1647, it wasn't until 1942 that the present Chapter Nine was added. That doesn't mean we didn't recognize the Holy Spirit for almost three hundred years, or that it wasn't at work in the church and in the world. We just couldn't seem to grasp it.

In that bestselling book of a few years back, *The Shack*, the Holy Spirit is depicted as a woman named Sarayu (which I think rhymes with "where are you?"). But that woman is hard to visualize, seeming to shimmer, and change shapes, colors, clothing, before one's very eyes. It is a fitting metaphor for the Spirit.

When I was in seminary, the debate was over whether to call the Spirit he or it. Today, the pronoun "she" is also applied to the Holy Spirit. The word used in the New Testament, *pneuma*, is indeed a feminine noun. The Old Testament equivalent, *ruach*, is masculine. However, both translate as "wind". The Spirit, like the wind, is something difficult to visualize, but which has lasting effects upon what it blows upon. The Spirit, like the wind, is an invisible force that produces visible results. The Spirit, like the wind, is something that can be felt, but not seen. We can only see the effects of or the response to both the wind and the Spirit.

The Pentecost stained glass window in the church from which I retired gives a traditional view of the Spirit: a dove, descending. But if one get close enough, one can see the tongues of fire upon the heads of all those depicted in the window.

Tongues of fire. Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire!

Would that our tongues would burn with the fire of the Holy Spirit, that we might speak words that would communicate the gospel and lead the world to Christ.

To me, that is what Pentecost is all about: empowering the church to communicate the gospel, so that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. We are called to hope for the day when at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I've thought about what happened on that day of Pentecost in the year that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven.

It was a miracle: these Galileans, these hillbillies from the north, up beyond Samaria even, all began to speak not in unknown tongues, but recognizably in tongues that could be understood in almost every part of the then-known world.

No wonder the word of God spread so swiftly amongst the nations! There were missionaries equipped to go out into the world and preach the gospel in every tongue to every nation.

My friend Ted Lewis has made many mission trips to Thailand. He speaks very little Thai. He speaks even less Karen, and it is to the Karen people, an ethnic minority within Thailand, that he has given most of his time, and most of his speeches and sermons. So he speaks through a translator. Several years ago I had to act as a translator for him while he was working out a deal with some Russians. It wasn't that I speak Russian, although I do know a few phrases. It was that the Russians couldn't understand his English. Ted speaks with such a South Georgia low country drawl, and uses so many country boy expressions, that the Russians couldn't keep up with what he was saying.

Ted has yearned to be able to address his beloved Thai friends the Karen people in their native language. Would that God could have given my friend the gift of the Holy Spirit to speak Thai or Karen! Yet they heard him, responded to him, loved him, because the Holy Spirit spoke through him, as he gave them words of the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord..

I have heard Hunter Farrell, Director of World Mission for our Denomination, speak. Hunter speaks English, French, Spanish, and Tsuluba, the native language of the Congo. One language he does not speak is Quechua, the native tongue of Peru. That is ironic, because, for a decade, Hunter was a missionary in Peru. He mastered enough Quechua to be able to open a presentation, a speech, a sermon, to bring greetings. So difficult is the language, that just those few words were enough so that his audiences of Quechua speakers often gave him a standing ovation after he delivered them.

Hunter has been a missionary in both Africa and Latin America, and he spoke of how important it is for our missionaries to be able to speak to the people in words they can understand. When he first went to Africa, he was asked, "When will you preach your first sermon in Tsuluba?" He answered, "I don't know one word in

Tsuluba.” His hosts responded, “We’ll give you two months to learn it!” And by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, he did.

Communicating the gospel is difficult enough when we are all speaking the same language, when we are all speaking the same words.

But in the early church, the disciples, those gathered there in that Upper Room, received gifts that empowered them to communicate the gospel, that all might know the Lord and be saved.

What gifts does the Holy Spirit give to the church today, to allow us to communicate the gospel better?

One of those gifts is music. Now not everyone enjoys the same kind of music. For some people, Beethoven, Handel, Vivaldi, Scarlatti, are the ultimate. For others, it is Bill and Gloria Gaither. Or Southern Gospel. For yet others, it is Mercy Me. Or Stephen Curtis Chapman.

I’ve been to services where all the music was jazz. And others where it was all country. I’ve been to services where there was no music.

There are some churches today that still ban the use of musical instruments in worship. There are others that have 50 piece orchestras. For some, the pipe organ is the ultimate. Others have drum sets and electric guitars.

Some have hundred member choirs. Others have a gospel quartet.

It is like all of the different languages that were spoken on the day of Pentecost: we may not understand all of them. We may not understand any one of them. But they are all gifts of the Holy Spirit, and they all speak to those with ears to hear them.

You know, there are so many gifts of technology to the church today. They are gifts of the Spirit as well.

We benefit from a few of them. Air conditioning is one. Some of us are old enough to remember when churches weren’t air conditioned. This church was built without air conditioning. That was unheard of in 1923. Can you imagine worshipping here in the summer time without it?

Sound amplification is another gift of technology. I could probably speak loud enough for you to hear me, but my delivery would be different, and my presence as well.

Many churches use video projection to enhance their worship services, as we did at the Youth Led service we used to have. Churches have fought battles over adding video screens to the worship space.

It wasn't that many years ago that churches fought battles over whether or not to allow pianos in church. Or electronic organs.

Purists would hold out for a pipe organ. I know. I served two churches that spent fortunes to rebuild and maintain old pipe organs, because electronic organs weren't "real organs", and were only fit for funeral parlors.

Well, the church I served for more than a quarter of a century never had an organ that wasn't an electronic organ. And no one has ever complained.

At least about the organ. But when other instruments, guitars, drums, trumpets, even handbells are added, some folks do complain. They don't like change. They don't like anything different.

When it comes to change, to music, to technology, we are often slow to embrace the new, the different.

But that is what the Holy Spirit does to us: The Spirit challenges us to open the doors and windows and let the winds of change blow through. And if we don't open them, the Spirit might just blow them open.

The Holy Spirit puts tongues of fire upon us. Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire! Sometimes, those tongues of fire are in our mouths, so that we can speak words filled with the Spirit. Other times, they are resting upon us, filling us, blessing us, illuminating us, so that the world can see the Spirit at work in us and through us. Sometimes they transform us into fireballs, a living flame ready to set the world on fire.

I believe the Holy Spirit is at work in First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida. I believe that the wind is blowing. I believe that there are tongues of fire. Great balls of fires!

Feel the wind. Listen to the fire. And feel the Spirit moving in and upon you.

Goodness gracious, great balls of fire! A change is coming! Hold on tight! But don't hold on tight to the past. Hold on tight to the Spirit!

Amen...and amen.

