

Scattering and Gathering

Last week I spoke about the two commonly used hand signals we employ to indicate our willingness to invite or reject closeness with others. There are other ways which are used to establish boundaries, to create barriers or to build bridges. Some are obvious, while others are more subtle. Today is Pentecost Sunday which the church celebrates as the coming of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of the promise made by Jesus to the disciples as he ascended to the Father in Luke's gospel and narrated by Luke in the book of Acts; it is also the day which the institution of the church celebrates as its birthday. On Friday, I had a conversation with the long time friend with whom I deliver Meals on Wheels who I know has been an active member of a congregation for many years. During this conversation, he asked me to explain—briefly, just what is this Pentecost about. Since Pentecost, like Easter, appears every year on the church calendar, this question came as a surprise to me. But, just for the sake of clarity, and to set the scene for this Pentecost, here is some background on what Pentecost is. To begin with—Pentecost—the name for the day comes from the association that the day has with Christianity's roots within the Jewish tradition. There were certain Jewish festivals which required pilgrimage to Jerusalem—like Passover and then fifty days after the 2nd day of Passover there was—Shavuot—or the Festival of Weeks which celebrated the giving of the Torah. So the timeline for Christianity—Crucifixion—three days—Easter—forty days then Ascension—Ten days—then arrival of the Holy Spirit—and you have the overlapping of the two faith traditions again. The Day of Pentecost—fifty days in Greek—for both traditions. That is the background for the name we use for this day, and also for the reason there were so many people from so many regions gathered there on the occasion. One of the features which is often pointed out from the passage read from Acts is verse 4: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." This was important because as it is stated in verse 5: "there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem". This was because they had gathered there from their native land to complete a pilgrimage, and so the disciples had a gathered audience for the gospel message which the arrival of the Spirit gave them the courage and the means to go out into the streets to proclaim. It is interesting that the reading from the Hebrew Scripture which is suggested for this Sunday is also about language, but instead of language as a means of gathering in the passage from Genesis, language becomes a barrier—it is the means of separating; of scattering people. As Genesis 11:1 begins, it tells us "the whole earth had one language and the same words." Sounds wonderful, doesn't it. Imagine how nice it would be to be able to go anywhere in the world and be able to talk with the people; for example, to go to France and be able to navigate the places you want to visit. But the plans that the people made with this ability were to not only build a city, but to make a tower with its top in heaven and to make a name for themselves. As the passage continues, the Lord sees what they are doing and decides to put a stop to the project. Genesis 11:7-8 "Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth. " This is passage forms the basis for the Sunday school lesson about the Tower of Babel. Much has been said about the sin of pride that led the people to try to reach heaven on their own; their lack of praise or worship. But whatever theological

truth you might derive about God's action in this text, the practical reality of multiple languages described is disruption—when people cannot understand one another—when they do not know what is meant, they cannot accomplish anything together. When the people could no longer speak the same language, all their ambitious plans were abandoned and they were scattered abroad over the face of the earth. When we come to the time of our second reading many centuries have passed. God has made a covenant with Abram, the people have been led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses and established in the Promised Land, been given the Torah and failed to be obedient to it...have been gathered and scattered...exiled and returned...given prophets and leaders...so at this particular time there is a moment when it seems that God wants there to once again a oneness of understanding. It is clear from the text that the crowd is diverse. The text doesn't exactly describe how the disciples go from the house where they are sitting when sound of the rushing wind fills the house and the tongues of fire rests on them into the streets where they begin speaking in other languages. But the crowd around them is vocal about their amazement. "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?" they ask. Now their native language would have been Aramaean, and maybe would have been able to speak some Greek or Latin, but the likelihood of their being fluent those, or knowing any of those other dialects of the ethnic groups named would have been nil, nada, zero, none. Yet the members of the crowd were from those very different and very varied ethnic which represented groups which represented peoples whose languages of origin—their native tongue, and what they report hearing is quiet specific: "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" "In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." This seems to me more than the sheer ability to speak a different language. Until I went off to college, I lived in Cabarrus County. I then spent 4 years living in Chapel Hill and then went entered a graduate degree program at Duke. So I had been living in Orange County for about 6 years when while I was visiting home, I struck up a conversation with someone in a checkout line at the local Wal-Mart in Concord. Much to my surprise, they wanted to know where I was from because I no longer sounded like I was from the area—I didn't seem to belong—I didn't speak with the native dialect. The way we speak is one of the more subtle ways we use to establish whether or not someone "belongs". Often it is by the accent which indicates a different area of origin, specifically a different country. Or perhaps, it is a speech impediment—maybe from a medical issue—or some other underlying cause. There are other language related ways we separate ourselves into groups of insiders and outsiders. Unfortunately—the church has a history of doing so by the language it uses—often called doctrine. When I read the story of the Day of Pentecost, what I read is the message of God's deeds of power being delivered through the movement of the Holy Spirit in such a way that each person—each person—no matter their origin—could hear it in their own native language. God was gathering the people again. That seems to me the message for us today. The message we have is of God's amazing love and grace for us which we will celebrate at the Table prepared for us by our host, Jesus Christ. We should then proclaim that message of love so all can hear it, as closely as we can, in the universal language of love and acceptance to that it is heard in the listeners native tongue. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

