

The Disempowering Spirit (2/2)

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Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

There are some passages in Scripture that we know so well that it is difficult to hear them afresh. We hear someone read, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho," and there is immediately the danger that our mind will wander off. After all, we already know the story, and we even know the point of the story. We are no longer surprised that the priest and the Levite pass by, nor that it is a Samaritan who offers help to the wounded man.

The story of Pentecost, which has just been read, is one of those passages. We already know that the story has a happy ending. We can no longer feel the terror that those first disciples must have felt when "suddenly from heaven there came the rush of a sound like a might wind."

They had no idea what this might be. A violent storm? An earthquake? Now we know that it was the coming of the Holy Spirit, and we find it difficult to be as awestruck as those first disciples must have been. Now we know that the tongues of fire will not burn their hair; that they are not to be feared; that they are actually the fulfilment of Jesus' promise. And because we know that, we find it difficult to read the text with the overwhelming sense of awe that the first disciples must have felt, or even with the sense of wonder of those all over the world who even today hear the story for the first time.

We hear, "When the day of Pentecost had come," and we know the rest of the story. And because we know the rest of the story, we pay little attention. We know that it tells us of the power of the Spirit that Jesus promised his disciples, and of the power of the Spirit that we now have. And we are ready to move to something else.

But the story has dimensions that we do not always notice. Furthermore, the story is the word of God, and God's word speaks anew every time we hear it.

And so I invite you to look at the story of Pentecost, not forgetting all the wonderful things we already know about it, but looking for those things we may not have noticed before.

This text is particularly relevant for us today, as we seek to witness in a context in which cultures mix in Los Angeles just as they did in first-century Jerusalem. There were then living in

Jerusalem “Parthians, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome.” And there are now living in Los Angeles Salvadorans, Mexicans, and residents of Nigeria, China and Tonga, Korea and Ghana, Guatemala and Germany, Thailand and the parts of Asia belonging to Russia, and visitors from New York and Washington and Nairobi. It was in that context that the early disciples had to give witness to Jesus Christ, who had risen from the dead, and it is in this context that we today have to give witness to the same Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

The task would seem impossible. How could a few fairly uneducated people, despised Galileans at that, witness to such a cosmopolitan and multicultural gathering as had taken place in Jerusalem?

The answer is simple, yet momentous: the risen Jesus had promised them that they would receive the power of the Spirit, and that with that power they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Now those Galilean disciples are able to give witness to Parthians and Elamites, Libyans and Cappadocians, because the Holy Spirit has come upon them and given them the power to communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers, so that all are able to understand what they are saying.

The answer to our multicultural challenge today, here in Los Angeles, must begin at the same point: It is only by the power of the Spirit that we shall be able to witness across the many linguistic, cultural, and social divides in the city, in the nation, and in the world.

So, the story of Pentecost is particularly relevant for us today, as a story of God's action empowering the church to cross barriers and borders, languages and cultures, and give witness to the Christ who shall reign to the ends of the earth, "wher'er the sun doth its successful journeys run."

But there is an interesting dimension in the text that we often miss. If the purpose of the Holy Spirit was to make it possible for all to hear the message of the first disciples, the Spirit had two options. One was to make it possible for all, Parthians, and Elamites, and Cappadocians, to understand the language of the disciples. The other was to make it possible for all, Parthians, and Elamites, and Cappadocians, to hear the message in their own tongue. In terms of communication, both options would appear to have the same result: they would all understand what the disciples were saying.

But in terms of the future shape of the church the difference between these two options is enormous. If the Spirit had chosen to make all understand the language of the first disciples, this would mean that this common language would henceforth be the proper language for

Christian proclamation and communication. Had the mark of having heard the message been to understand the language of the first messengers, those first messengers would retain control both of the message and of the church.

But this is not the option that the Spirit chooses. Instead, the Spirit makes it possible for all to hear, each in their own tongue. This means several things.

It means first of all that all languages and all cultures are capable of bearing and transmitting the message of the risen Lord. The message is by its very nature and from its very origins capable of translation. Furthermore, it requires translation if the disciples of Jesus are to bear witness to the ends of the earth. And this is not just something we do because we wish to communicate the Gospel. It is something the Spirit enables us to do.

Secondly, it means that no language is privileged over others. After Pentecost, the message can be proclaimed just as well in Aramaic as it can be in Latin, or in Greek, or in English, or in Spanish, or in Swahili. I do not know whether there was an “Aramaic-only” movement in first-century Palestine. But if there was, the miracle of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit’s radical rejection of any such movement.

But thirdly—and this is probably the most important point for us today—it also means that the power of the Spirit is a strange sort of power. It is strange not only, as many seem to think today,

because it comes in extraordinary ways and because it may lead to extraordinary manifestations. It is strange because the power of the Spirit is not the power to retain power, but rather the power to empower others.

Think about it for a moment. The result of the story of Pentecost would be that there would now be believers who did not speak the language of the apostles. They would gather and worship in their own language. And this in itself would mean that the apostles would not be able to know exactly what was going on, nor to keep control. We already see an inkling of this in Acts 6, where there is dissatisfaction among the Hellenistic members of the church, apparently because the twelve, who were in charge of the distribution of support for the widows, did not understand the needs of the Hellenistic widows as well as they understood the needs of the widows of their own cultural group. And if you read the entire book of Acts, it is clear that the apostles do not long remain the center of the story. First it is the seven elected in chapter 6, particularly Stephen and Philip. Then there is another who was neither one of the twelve nor one of the seven. From this point on, whenever the twelve appear again at the center of the story, in chapter 10 with the story of Cornelius and in 15 with the gathering at Jerusalem, the Spirit is leading them to recognize what the Spirit is doing quite apart from them and from their control.

The first disciples did receive the power of the Spirit. That much is clear in the text. But what is equally clear, and we often miss, is that they did not receive that power in order to remain

powerful, but in order to pass it on to others—and that in itself would require that their own power be limited. The Spirit gives us power, yes, but it is a strange sort of power, a power very different from what the world understands by power.

This should not surprise us, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, of the one who “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . .” The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the one who told his disciples: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you.”

Too often we forget that the manner in which the Spirit empowers us is parallel to the manner in which Jesus conquers sin and death. And so, we often think that, if we are empowered by the Spirit, this should give us authority over others; that, if we are empowered by the Spirit, it should show in our success, in the size of our congregations, in the respect people have for us, in people seeing us as their leaders and their benefactors.

But Jesus says that it is not so with us. With us, those who have the greatest share of the power of the Spirit are those who use that power to empower others, even though this might mean giving up some of their power.

Just as there were then in Jerusalem Parthians, and Elamites, and Cappadocians, so today there

today in Los Angeles are Hondurans, and Japanese, and Kenyans, and English-speaking, and Spanish-speaking, and Chinese-speaking people. And today in Los Angeles, as then in Jerusalem, we shall be able to communicate the Gospel to this great variety of people and cultures only by the power of the Spirit. Yet not by the power of any spirit, but by the power of the Spirit of Jesus, by a power that does not retain power, but rather shares itself with others. By the power of the Spirit that allows us, difficult as it may be, to have in us “the same mind that was in Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”

May the Spirit grant us this sort of power. And may we be ready to receive it. Amen.

