

May 23, 2010, Pentecost Sunday
United Church of Northfield
Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2: 1-12

Spirit Alive!
Rev. Roger L. Brown

Introduction

From Chaos to Order – From Confusion to Understanding

During the last year and a half, as some of you know, I've been studying foreign languages as a mental challenge and perhaps you would call it a hobby. As is typical when we begin to take a certain direction in life, the path ultimately goes in directions we did not anticipate. Originally, I wanted to study German. It was the first foreign language I studied in depth, and I lived in Germany for a summer long ago. However, the School for International Training – we call it SIT – which is near Brattleboro – did not offer German. They had classes in French, Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, and Swahili. So I chose French since I thought I could go to Canada quite easily to practice it, and it would promote my dream to return to Paris someday. So a year ago January I took 2 weeks of immersion French. At the end, I knew about 70 French verbs, and still I could not hold a real conversation. Last Fall I discovered that at SIT, Chinese Mandarin was free! As you can guess, “free” is very motivating. So I took the Fall Mandarin course. Then, in January, I took the 2 week immersion course in Mandarin. That was fun and I made progress. But I still cannot hold a conversation in Mandarin. I know a few characters, and I have a sense of how the language works. I also learned a lot about Chinese culture.

It probably is no surprise to you all that I discovered that language is the key to understanding people and their culture. The study of Mandarin has also been a bridge to some connections to Chinese people. Through my Mandarin teacher and other Chinese students at SIT, I have learned more about Chinese culture and I now feel more connected to the country and the culture in a more intimate way.

Scripture Connection

One of the powerful threads which runs through today's lexionary texts is the theme of language and its connection to culture and community. In our Bible texts, we shall discover again how language holds the community and the culture together. We shall see how the Spirit gives the creative enabling energy to bring people together and make them one. Let us begin with Genesis and the story of the Tower of Babel.

Genesis – Tower of Babel

In the Genesis story, God's people in their quest to get closer to God, build a great tower reaching up toward Heaven where God is thought to live. God had been watching their growing abilities to manage the technology of tower building, and he becomes worried that their technology will make them too powerful. And with too much power and knowledge God fears his people will get in trouble.

So, to confuse and weaken the people, God confuses their language, and scatters them all over the Earth. This event took place in what later became Babylon which is located in present day Iraq. You might be interested to know that in Babylonian language, “babilini” means “gate of the gods.” This strategy worked, for the text says, “they left off building the city.”

Acts 2 Lexionary Text – The Pentecost Event

So it happens that there are many languages all over the Earth, and there are many groups of people as history evolves. God begins to bring people together by choosing a

group of people and calling them Israelites. As it happens, the story in Acts tells us that people from all over the known world gather for the Feast of Weeks. About 120 people are gathered in one big room. Suddenly they hear a sound like a rushing wind, and they see what appears to be flames of fire on each person. Then, even though they are speaking different languages, they hear the Gospel story in their own language. Hearing the Gospel story in their own language means they can understand it. When the Spirit comes, their understanding is possible.

Active Evidence of the Spirit Signs of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, is perhaps the least understood of the three? Our scriptures for today give us some good clues to the work and nature of the Holy Spirit.

The first clue is found in the story in Acts. This story shows very dramatically that when the Spirit comes there are clear signs. There were three signs by my count. The first sign was a mighty wind. This sign is rather unusual because we often think of the Spirit as coming in a very gentle fashion: “breath on me, breath of God,” we will sing following the sermon. The second sign were the tongues of fire. So it is that a flame has become part of the United Methodist Church logo. This also is the reason many of us are wearing red this morning.

The third clue is often said to be “speaking in tongues.” But I think it is more about what was heard and understood, that the language matter. People heard their language, so then the Gospel was understood. The Spirit makes possible understanding.

Insight from John 14:15 - 17

The text for today in the Gospel of John, which we didn't read today gives us further insight into the work of the Holy Spirit. In this text, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

Two important things can be said about this little text. First the spirit will be an “advocate” – a helper. The Greek word here is “paraclete.” It's important to know that a paraclete is someone sent to help.

Secondly, the Spirit will be the “Spirit of truth” who promotes understanding.

Finally, Jesus adds the following key comments:

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Again, the teaching by the Spirit promotes understanding.

Revisiting “Begin, Belong, Become” Motto

Jesus also said that some people would not know the Spirit when the Spirit came. This means to me that most of the time there has to be some receptivity to the Spirit for the Spirit to work effectively. Without an openness to the Spirit, the Spirit cannot comfort, teach or help in a constructive or effective way. What is it that will allow for the Spirit to dwell within a person to guide and to comfort? There are many levels of spiritual development involved here, but for this Sunday, the birthday of the church, I want to focus on the work of the Spirit in and through the church. In order to get a really good and very neat understanding of what was happening at Pentecost, I want to remind you first of the spiritual growth process I spoke about last Sunday. This was the really neat motto of the United Methodist Church in Montpelier: “Begin, Belong, Become.”

Spiritual Development at Pentecost

This was what was happening in Jerusalem, almost 2,000 years ago at Pentecost. There came together a group of people who had gathered to hear the Apostle Peter preach. (In Acts, Peter has a sermon following the tongue of flames event) They have come together. They have come to Jerusalem, the holy city, the place of the great Temple. I think that even before the Spirit came, they were hyped up, they were ready. When the Spirit came, and made it possible for them to hear the Gospel, the Good News, in their own language, the spirit was teaching. I believe many of those gathered with the disciples were at that point in their spiritual journey where they were eager, expectant, so that the Good News was just what they were ready to hear at that very moment in time.

Then, at that special point in history, the Church of Jesus Christ could begin. For when you have a committed group of believers who claim the Good News, the Risen Christ, for their Savior, for their spiritual guide, then you have a church. Then you have a group to belong –they belong to Christ and they belong to and with one another. When you've got this sort of stuff happening, then you've got a church! Yahoo!

Now I do not believe that the Spirit just drops by for a short visit. I believe that the Spirit is ready to guide, to comfort, to help and to teach anyone anywhere any time. Then, as the Spirit works within the life and heart of each person, then each person grows closer to God, and that growing closer is the "becoming" of the growing Christian and a church of "becomers" is a growing spiritually vital church!

United Church of Northfield Future and tapping the Spirit

This morning, this Pentecost Sunday, we here at the United Church are calling on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is here. I'm convinced of that. Now you won't see flames sprouting on the heads of the Choir, for example. Paul said, you will know by the fruits of the Spirit. It's a long list, so you can know that the Spirit is at work here in the United Church of Northfield when any number of things happen. Just to give you some good clues, here's Paul's list from "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Find these characteristics in a church and you know the Spirit is alive!

The Spiritual Connection to Feasibility Study Forum after Worship

Long ago in Jerusalem, the Spirit came, and the people were one. God had scattered his people long ago, and now he was bringing them back together. They came together in Jerusalem, and became a people of one mind, the mind of Christ, the mind that follows the word of Jesus Christ. This miracle of oneness and unity came when they could talk with one another and understand. I believe, the unity, the spirit of one mind came through dialog and conversation with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This morning we have gathered again. We have journeyed together and we belong to Christ. If we are open to the Spirit and its guidance and its teaching, we can become of one mind. When we gather together after worship to consider the future of the United Church, let us be open to the work of the Spirit. Let us seek its guidance and let us seek to be of one mind.

This morning as we look to the future of the church, let us become not only the church of the good shepherd as the window above the altar declares, but the Church of the Holy Spirit, and the Church of Jesus Christ. It is well that in this interim time, when we are charged to look wisely to the future, and charged to shape well our ministry that we catch the Spirit. Amen!