

**For a Thousand Tongues**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
May 31, 2020: Pentecost  
Online worship

**Purpose:** To open ourselves to the work of Pentecost as an active gift of the Spirit.

**Message:** We are given the gift of the Spirit to bring us to a way of translating the Spirit into the world.

**Scripture:** Acts 2:1-21; Genesis 11:1-9

**Synopsis:** Anabaptists are not known for their spiritualism. Incarnation we get—being the hands and feet of Jesus comes naturally to us and speaks to our theological souls. But the gifting of the Spirit, especially in the form of fire and wind makes us uneasy. Were the happenings of Pentecost to visit us this morning, it would be much more likely for us to call 911 then to go on rejoicing for the way of God. We label Pentecost a miracle of early church history, a notion to be recalled and recognized, but not lived; not expected in our time and place.

Yet I think it is exactly this movement of the Spirit that serves us well as a model of doing church in the present. Far from erasing the differences in languages that separate one from the next (the curse of Babel from the Genesis reading), we have the one voice of God and the good news being incarnated in the many languages of those who had ears to listen, to move and to respond. The miracle here is not that everyone once again spoke the same language, but that the Spirit met everyone in the language they could understand, making real the working of the spirit in their midst. Might this incarnation of God with us be a guide to us as we see in our own midst the many ways of being a disciple to which we are called?

**Acts 2:1-21 Message**

2 When the Feast of Pentecost came,  
they were all together in one place.  
Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—  
no one could tell where it came from.  
It filled the whole building.  
Then, like a wildfire,  
the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks,  
and they started speaking in a number of different languages  
as the Spirit prompted them.

There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then,  
devout pilgrims from all over the world.

When they heard the sound, they came on the run.  
Then when they heard, one after another,  
their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck.  
They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying,  
“Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?”

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites;  
Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia,  
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,  
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;  
Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;  
Even Cretans and Arabs!  
“They’re speaking our languages, describing God’s mighty works!”

Their heads were spinning; they couldn’t make head or tail of any of it.  
They talked back and forth, confused: “What’s going on here?”  
Others joked, “They’re drunk on cheap wine.”

That’s when Peter stood up and,  
backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency:  
“Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem,  
listen carefully and get this story straight.  
These people aren’t drunk as some of you suspect.  
They haven’t had time to get drunk—it’s only nine o’clock in the morning.  
This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:

“In the Last Days,” God says,  
“I will pour out my Spirit  
on every kind of people:  
Your sons will prophesy,  
also your daughters;  
Your young men will see visions,  
your old men dream dreams.  
When the time comes,  
I’ll pour out my Spirit  
On those who serve me, men and women both,  
and they’ll prophesy.  
I’ll set wonders in the sky above  
and signs on the earth below,  
Blood and fire and billowing smoke,  
the sun turning black and the moon blood-red,  
Before the Day of the Lord arrives,  
the Day tremendous and marvelous;  
And whoever calls out for help  
to me, God, will be saved.”

## Genesis 11:1-9 (Message)

11 At one time, the whole Earth spoke the same language.

It so happened that as they moved out of the east,

they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled down.

3

They said to one another, “Come, let’s make bricks and fire them well.”

They used brick for stone and tar for mortar.

4

Then they said,

“Come, let’s build ourselves a city

and a tower that reaches Heaven.

Let’s make ourselves famous

so we won’t be scattered here and there across the Earth.”

5

GOD came down to look over the city

and the tower those people had built.

6-9

GOD took one look and said,

“One people, one language; why, this is only a first step.

No telling what they’ll come up with next—they’ll stop at nothing!

Come, we’ll go down and garble their speech

so they won’t understand each other.”

Then GOD scattered them from there all over the world.

And they had to quit building the city.

That’s how it came to be called Babel,

because there GOD turned their language into “babble.”

From there GOD scattered them all over the world.

Today is a day of celebration. It may not feel it. Our world is heavy in these days. This week has brought new disappointments, injustice, violence, despair. As the Chinese curse would have it, these are interesting times that we have been given to live through. But it is a celebration day all the same; it is the day of Pentecost—the coming of the Spirit and the celebration that we have not been left alone. In my experience though, Pentecost is a holiday somewhat in the same way as Groundhog day is a holiday; except Groundhog day gets a bit more notice if only to know whether the rodent has wisdom to impart. In the church year, this is the completion of the circuit that we have every year. From Advent to Christmas, celebrating Christ's birth, then the preparations of Lent and the darkness of Holy Week to be replaced by the bright whiteness of the Easter. Now seven weeks later, we mark Pentecost to wrap up the whole thing for another year so we can move on into the sexily branded "Ordinary Time".

Most of the time it is one of those churchly holidays where if you are really observant you might see some different colors about and someone like me speaks to the meaning of the day in a fashion that is good for 24 hours on a good day. We don't have the usual trappings to tell us that holiday has come. There are no trimmings and trappings, and we have yet to find a commercially viable way to have flames of fire come and rest upon us. This year even the usual hymns are somewhat off key: *Breathe on me Breath of God* has to be placed at a safe distance. I am guessing that if God would take us at our word and would have the Holy Spirit come with power, it would be more likely a cause for the emergency services as opposed to the singing of praises. We are doers of the word, we Anabaptists. We don't always know what to do with the fuzzier notions of the Spirit, especially when our sense of the world might be more than a couple of degrees askew.

We spoke of the Spirit a couple of weeks ago, if you happen to recall. Color me optimistic if I think that perhaps one of the persons of the trinity can bear the scrutiny of more than one Sunday a year. The other week, we sat with how we might recognize the Spirit. Today I want to sit with what might be the work of the Spirit at a time such as these.

We look to Pentecost as a primarily historical event in which the Disciples were given their full commission to go forth and live the life of the kingdom with which they had been charged. They got the Spirit so they could go on and do the stuff we hear about in the rest of Acts. The Spirit, while still present, has entered a different line of work, empowering the

individual to live lives of personal piety, but rarely making public appearances in the same way as back in the day. Call it a seasoned propriety. Others struggle to understand how one can do church without possessing the full manifestations of the Spirit as we read them here—the healings, the speaking in tongues and all the rest. This leads me to wonder if there might be a third way in between these extremes. Perhaps Pentecost is here to remind us of ongoing work of God that we are all a part of; the work of the Spirit that brings God's way and being to those who need it most.

I am guessing it will not come as a shock to many of you to learn that I am a Star Trek fan. Shocking; no doubt. Not quite pointy ears, costumes, and all the rest level of fan, but I know my Star Trek lore, and am fairly confident that I have seen pretty much every episode and movie the franchise has ever made through the years, even the odd numbered original movies that prove inextricably poor. The show asks big questions in a way that I like. This is helped, in large part, by a handy theatrical device cooked up to simplify plot lines; the universal translator. Here we are given a ubiquitous device which functions to even out the thornier issues of encountering new worlds and new understandings. This is a handy device indeed; one that we all at one point or another have probably wished that we had for ourselves. Every so often, you have a plot where one goes awry and they have to make do just to make a point about understanding one another. But otherwise the future is one where language is basically erased as if Babble never happened.

That is what we often assume is happening here with the gathered foreigners hearing this incredible happening at Pentecost. As the listing of countries indicates, this includes people from the ends of the earth. As is often the case with Christian Holidays, Pentecost is a feast at the temple and not first and foremost a moment of our history. Pentecost is one of the 3 holidays when people were encouraged to make the trip to the temple to offer thanks for the giving of the Torah, the law in the first five books of the Bible.

We assume it is like when the UN meets in General Assembly—a whole lot of people with earphones with a message being translated. But look closely. That is not how it is. The miracle here is not one particularly of understanding what was being said in a translated word for word into their own language, but that the disciples are given the gift to be able to articulate the good news and to be UNDERSTOOD in the many tongues that heard it. Notice that the recorded list is well longer than the 11 disciples who are set to speaking. The work of

the spirit was to empower the disciples to be able to speak as they need to speak, to testify to what they knew or the way of God, and to be enabled in that speech to be understood by those who they encountered. In this way, we have the tower of Babel—the confusing of the language, not allowing the people to hear and listen to each other—being put into a different light when the Spirit of the Living God does what ever it takes to help people understand what God is up to in the world. The work of the Spirit is not just to enable people to speak in new ways, but it is to enable their speech to serve the work of YHWH in the here and now.

For me I think that is something I can wrap my head around, something I can celebrate. Because it is this sense of God with us, of Immanuel kicking it up a notch, and coming to be with all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. It sounds a whole lot like the God with us that we know and love. Pentecost is the start of God continuing on with what is started in Jesus: making himself known in new ways that are real and meaningful to people where they are at. That is pretty amazing. And that work continues even today. Because we know that God comes to us and messes with our lives. Sometimes in ways we don't understand. Sometimes in ways we wish were not so. But the Spirit enables us to do what we do not know how if we remain open to the possibility of God working through us, even when we may not expect it.

We often see the primary gift of Pentecost as the gift of speaking. The church at Pentecost is given not just voices to speak, but new ears to hear the moving of God's spirit among God's people. The issue of language is completely embraced, giving the new community both voices to speak, but in also ears to hear, to listen and truly comprehend the workings of what God was doing in that time and that place. Language is a matter of speaking, of forming words into thoughts and ideas. But it is also a matter of listening to those thoughts and ideas, allowing ourselves to be transformed by those ideas that allows us to listen, and to move toward a future together, hearing each other, hearing God. We are moved by the Spirit to speak the changing, challenging word of God. We are also moved by the Spirit to listen, to listen to each other, to try to understand what the other is truly saying, and to listen carefully to the creating, moving spirit of God at work among us. Theologian Walter Bruggemann writes: *“The capacity to listen in ways which transform depends upon trust in the speaker, readiness to be impacted, and willingness to have newness come into one's life.... Failed*

*speech is linked to the disappearance of trust. Not listening is related to death in a relationship. To fail to listen means to declare the other party null and void. A society which suffers failed speech, as in our text, not only cannot build towers, it cannot believe promises, cannot trust God, cannot be human.”*

I don't know about you, but that has more than a bit of the ring of truth about it, no? Pentecost celebrates God shifting gears in continuing what God does best: Comes to us, and reaches out to us, inviting us to listen to God's call, to be invigorated by it and trust it as we are invited into what God is already doing around us. That is what this day is. That is what is going on. And that is absolutely something to celebrate, each and every day.

What's more, I think it is something to celebrate precisely it is the work of the Spirit to bridge the gaps between us. We have many towers of babble that need to be torn down and reversed. The towering mistrusts we have of each other in politics, in location, pride of place and role, in Race both between those who are persistently targeted by the systems of the day and we who wear our privilege without awareness or even comprehension. And that is just this week's list—comprehensiveness is a good ways off.hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh Sometimes all we can do is cry time and again “Lord, have mercy”, Kyrie Eleison. The impossibilities of healing what ails us ways heavy, and we can be left despairing of change, of healing, of difference.

Perhaps that is the best news of today: that this work is ours yes, but not ours alone. It is the work of the Spirit. To prod us to listen better, to speak less quickly and know more deeply. We easily can articulate the wrongness of the world, even if the individual items of our lists might be different here and there. We are called to do what we can to work at that list, but we are not left alone; the Spirit intercedes for us where our mere words and deeds fail to even touch the matter at hand—a sentiment that I know I have felt all too keenly this week with the incomprehensible violence yet at hand. Does this excuse our lack of action. No it does not. We all share the gift of making our world better. But it does rightly balance the work of what we must carry to rest not solely on our own shoulders, but with the Spirit as well.

Come Holy Spirit, fill us with your fire, and kindle us again to hear your good word and be doers of that word always. And allow us to listen even when we don't understand.