



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF PENTECOST, JUNE 8, 2025
ACTS 2:1-21; ROMANS 8:14-17; PSALM 104: 25-35,37; JOHN 14:8-17, 25-27

THE HUMAN LANGUAGE OF BABEL AND PENTECOST



Many of you know that Kathy and I have discovered the joys of grandparenting together—that sublime amalgam of wonderstruck love mixed with the liberating delight of spoiling grandkids then returning them to their parents.

The grandchild is now three-and-a-half, and for the last year they've been fostering a boy just one year older. The two preschoolers function as siblings close in age—playing hard and fighting fiercely. But in recent months we've noticed a curious thing when

¹ <https://www.jennortonartstudio.com/pentecost-and-the-holy-spirit/>

we are with them—when these two little ones are full-in on their play, they occasionally abandon their native English and communicate with a babble that they apparently understand and from which they get great delight. It is a thing to marvel.

Known as *idioglossia*, it is fairly common with twins. Others don't understand what they are saying, but they do at some level that brings them mutual delight. Babbling words and sounds, shared in a way that intensifies their experience of their close-knit play. It is a lovely thing to behold.

I have a sense that something similar was at play on that festival day two thousand years ago when the first followers of Jesus experienced the capacity to speak an array of languages that would have been utterly foreign to them, but by doing so, those gathered heard the message of mutual delight the disciples had to share. The Book of Acts tells us the disciples “were all in one accord (Acts 1:14),” which I take to mean they were open to the Spirit's moving them to action. They became agents of the Spirit.

This Feast of Pentecost is the Feast of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God who is the protagonist in the story, that first feast day of the Church, and ever since. The Living Church draws breath and purpose from the very Spirit of God.

Just a few verses after the piece of Acts 2 we just heard, Peter tells those assembled:

My heart is glad, my tongue rejoices;

Moreover, my flesh shall live in hope.

The people are moved and asked him, What then should we do? Peter says, be baptized, and they were...and we do, here today. The Spirit moves in our midst, friends. This is our story.

Contrast that to the story from Genesis, where Babel serves as etiological myth of the diversity of languages spoken upon earth, but also as mythic wisdom explaining the capacity of human ego to muck things up. We would do well to avoid oversimplifying this story to suggest God was somehow threatened by the prospect of ascendent human power and therefore cast us into a confusing chaos of diverse language.

Marilynn Robinson suggests in her latest book *Reading Genesis* that God creates humans with an amalgam of love, delight, and regret, a strange admixture perhaps (regret may not seem at first glance a divine attribute), but it fits because God sees our capacity for goodness and depravity and holds it all together. God tries time and again to help us reset. But, importantly, in spite of our wiles, God remains steadfastly faithful to

us, even we turn away from God. This is our story, too.

Bringing both stories forward, we can see the Babel story playing out in our world today: division, mistrust and hatred have led to a social and political climate in which we no longer understand one another. We've largely stopped speaking with one another across lines of disagreement.

The present-day political language of ascendent power and ad hominem attacks comes with Machiavellian impulses, diminishing human dignity in a zero-sum game while devastating the moral fiber of our modern-day Babel society. To be clear, God did not cause this, but surely, we can see the admixture of divine regret mingled with the creative forces of love and delight for humanity. The steadfastly faithful God had better things in mind for us than this.

And so we ask: What then should we do?

And this is where the language of Pentecost becomes so essential for us here and now in this community, and for the world we are called to serve in God's name.

The miracle of community, the miracle of this Saint Mark's community, is not that we have any innate capacity to erect the proverbial tower of glory in self-idolatrous satisfaction... any such efforts will surely end

in the cacophony of contempt for one another. The Church, this church, has tried to build that Babel in other times, and it doesn't work.

No, the miracle of community, the miracle of this Saint Mark's community, is that the Spirit is moving in our midst, is lighting upon human flesh, is inspiring us to speak the language of divine love in ways that intensifies the experience of the close-knit play that is this Christian way and life. This is the way in which we can understand one another in mutual delight.

We are invited to speak the language of the Spirit, and trust that she is doing greater things with us and for us than we could ever ask for or imagine. Like those first disciples, we are invited to be all in one accord, which is to say, to be open to the Spirit's moving us to action. This world of ours needs nothing less than a full-on conversion experience, and we are invited to play a part, to become agents of the Spirit here and now.

We baptize today—an infant, a toddler, and an adult—because we trust that the Spirit is up to something with us in this community. And the words come that we understand:

My heart is glad, my tongue rejoices;

Moreover, my flesh shall live in hope.

So, let's baptize, shall we?!

ACTS 2:1-21 [When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples 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." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: `In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"]

Genesis 11:1-9 [Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 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, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.]