

“What does this mean?”

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New Testament Lesson: Acts 2:1-12

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 48:16-17

Last week when the day of the Preaching Conference had come, we were all together in one place. And suddenly from the loud speaker there came a sound that had the blood rushing through our veins, right there where we were sitting.

Many different viewpoints on the health of the church, afire with passion, were lifted up, washing over each of us. We were all touched by the Holy Spirit as the presenters began to speak from their different perspectives, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Christians from across the nation gathered there in Denver. And at hearing their different points of view, I was bewildered because each one of them was speaking from a different perspective and yet they all seemed to be saying the same thing – speaking the same language, if you will.

And I wondered, how is it that I hear them all saying the same thing: Baptist preachers, Lutherans and Presbyterians; professors and authors, young preachers covered in tattoos and white-haired sages steeped in wisdom; musicians traditional and contemporary, evangelicals and leaders of house churches – in their own language I heard them speaking about God’s deeds of power.

I was amazed and perplexed, saying to myself, “What does this mean?” That’s how I, along with 1,300 others, spent last week. It felt a little like being one of the earliest disciples on that first Pentecost Sunday, when the Holy Spirit was sent to guide the church into an uncertain future.

According to the Book of Acts, they, too, were gathered in one place, coming from vastly different backgrounds with a wide range of heartfelt convictions about what is right and what is wrong, what will work and what is not possible, things that fit well with the exciting structures of their time and approaches to sharing the Gospel that were new, unfamiliar, and not at all the way organized religion used to be done, in their time, according to their traditions.

Notice that when the Holy Spirit came upon these earliest disciples, it was as divided tongues like flames of fire, a tongue of fire resting on each and every one of them. We are not supposed to all think alike. We are not supposed to all say things the same way.

Each of us has a different perspective, a different view point about what works and what doesn’t for the church, in our families and as individuals.

At the preaching conference I attended in Denver last week, when it comes to being the church, it was apparent that all types of churches are able to do well – traditional and contemporary, new and historic, evangelical and missional. It was also apparent that all types of churches are struggling with the same cultural issues – how to reach young people, facilities geared for a different era, over-scheduled families and less-than-committed parents, and just a general distrust of organized religion. These are the barriers to the Gospel in our day and age.

But if we keep ourselves focused on our mission as bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ, there is no doubt that God will see us through to overcome these and any barriers we may face.

The problem comes when our message is less about the Good News of Jesus Christ and more about us – our wants and needs, our preconceived notions about what's right and what's not right, our limited view of what is possible with God.

God has shown us again and again since the beginning of human history that what is impossible for us is possible with God. Even before written history, God used the wisdom traditions of ancient peoples to show us what God is capable of overcoming and accomplishing.

For instance, in one of the sermons last week in Denver, Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Seminary, preached about the Garden of Eden. Now you would think that, in the beginning, we were perfect in every way, without any flaw and with nothing lacking. And maybe for a brief time that was true.

But then here comes Craig Barnes pointing out that smack in the middle of the Garden of Eden is the tree of Forbidden Fruit – the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Barnes says we were created to have areas of uncertainty, things we don't understand and can't have, holes in our lives that leave us with something missing, always something that needs fixing. And God calls that paradise! Thanks, God. Really, thank God we don't know it all.

Can you imagine if any one of us had our way when it comes to what's right and what's wrong, what works and what doesn't? We'd surely mess it up big time – this world of ours. God know this. It's even in the Bible.

No doubt, some of you remember the Tower of Babel. When humankind all spoke one language and together decided to build a tower stretching up to heaven. And God saw this. God saw that we were overreaching, trying to be on the same level as God, even if we had to climb over one another to do it.

And what did God do? Confused our language. God made it so that everyone spoke a different language and could no longer make any definitive declaration over and against what God ordains, what God decides is right, what God makes possible.

I'm talking about any issue you can think of. Any issue you think you know for sure, any belief or conviction – anything that goes beyond the earliest and most

simply stated creed of the Christian faith: Jesus is Lord. Beyond that conviction, we can not be certain of anything, in-and-of-ourselves. Beyond that conviction, we have to rely on the Holy Spirit, who leads us to the truth, as together we wrestle with the issues of our day – what’s right and what’s wrong, what works and what doesn’t, for us as families, as individuals, and as the church

And that struggle requires that we as Christians rely on the grace of God, extended freely to us by God and shared freely by us among all the faithful of good conscience.

It’s OK to disagree. That’s how God fashioned us – each of use speaking in our own way, seeing things from our own perspective. This is OK, as long as we have faith in God to set things right, trust in Jesus Christ to show us the way forward, and as long as we rely on the Holy Spirit to shower us and all people with grace and mercy.

What I just described, us coming together amid our differences, that’s how the church got its start! On the first ever Day of Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus and, behold, they all began to speak in other languages.

But instead of babble and confusion, each person from across the globe could finally hear about, understand, and accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ! In sending to us the Holy Spirit, God took those differences that make us who we are and sanctified them, made them OK in God’s eyes.

There has never been a time when people were supposed to be the same in every way – think the same thing, act the same way. God made us as different people, God separated us into different nations, different peoples at the foot of the Tower of Babbble. And then in Christ, at the coming of the Holy Spirit, God took those differences and united them in the Gospel of our Lord and Savior.

When Yuri and I were driving to Denver and back, we saw a new kind of farm, different from anything we’d ever seen before. What we saw were the wind farms of Kansas and Colorado. Just amazing. The horizon filled as far as the eye can see with wind turbines, 20 stories tall. And the interesting thing was some were working and some were not. Most of the wind turbines were working. But a few were not. And this left Yuri and I wondering “what does this mean.”

Why were some of the wind turbines spinning by the power of the wind, while others right next to them sat motionless, not doing anything productive? It’s kind of like us and the Holy Spirit. For some of us, the Holy Spirit is experienced as a powerful wind turning us toward God’s good purpose. For others of us – and this includes all of us at sometime or another – there is no motion. It just seems like we’re missing out on the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Or, looking at someone else, we’re certain that that person has no relationship with the Holy Spirit, no connection with God in what he or she is doing, thinking, planning, loving, hating, choosing, refusing, subduing, or unleashing.

We look at the choices of others and we can tell, can't we – we can tell what's right and what's wrong! Or can we? Maybe the wind turbines that Yuri and I saw not spinning were supposed to be not spinning at that time. Maybe they were turned aside from the wind, to capture it from another angle, to receive it and use it from another direction. I don't know. I'm no wind farmer. I'm just a preacher.

But as a preacher, I do know that God can and does turn all people to God's good purpose. I know that sometimes God uses me to help do that. The problem for me – and for each of us, I suspect – is that we don't know for sure when God is using us or when we're being used by a contrary spirit – a worldly spirit opposed to God's will.

The best we can do is stay true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and trust God to set things right in the end.

The Holy Spirit is the mechanism and the force that God uses to set things right. And not one of us has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. Not one of us standing alone is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, sent forth to declare what's what in God's eyes. Not one of us! But rather, all of us. God works through all of us, as the church – as the body of Christ. God works through us collectively to set things right in this world.

Together, as we prayerfully and faithfully discern the will of Christ we participate in bringing about the Kingdom of God, right here on earth.

We will never do this perfectly. We will never do this with certainty. We will always sense that there is something missing, something not right, something amiss. Always – until the return of Christ, when all things will be set right again.

So don't look for perfection in yourself or in others. Instead, look for faith, and grace, and mercy. Look to God to set things right, in God's time. And look in your heart for how God would have you participate in this, in God's plan and purpose for this day, and in all our tomorrows. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, the promise of Pentecost is the promise of power – the power to be peacemakers in a world torn by violence; the power to forgive our own guilt and the guilt of others; the power to be courageous in the face of danger; the power to offer hope and joy in the midst of pain and suffering.

We are thankful this day for the power you give us to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, through our service to our communities and, for our men and women in the military, in service to our country.

We are thankful for those graduating high school and college this year, for the power you have given them to change the world for the better.

And we are thankful, Lord, for the power of your church, and how you empower us to be a positive influence amid the changing dynamics of life in Christian community.

O Lord, embolden us, we pray, to testify to your presence in the world, to exemplify your love for all humanity, and to open our hearts to being radically changed by your Spirit.

We pray all this in the name of the One who sent your Spirit among us that we might follow in his ways, even as together we unite in the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**