

## ***“Filled with the Holy Spirit”***

### [Acts 2:1-13](#)

This past week, Aaron Schlossberg, a New York City-based lawyer, found himself suddenly becoming famous for all the wrong reasons: a video of his hateful, racist rant inside of Fresh Kitchen, a casual restaurant in midtown Manhattan, went viral on the internet.

In an incident captured on a smartphone, he angrily berated employees and customers of the restaurant for speaking Spanish. He baselessly accused them of being undocumented and threatened to call ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, so that, quoting his own words, “to have each of them kicked out of *my* country,” He said to someone who appeared to be the manager of the restaurant, “If they have the balls to come here and live off my money, I pay for their welfare. I pay for their ability to be here. The least they can do is ... speak English.”

As more stories of the attorney’s past history of hatred, racism and bigotry surfaced, the public reaction to his actions were swift. He was shamed on social media; people flooded Yelp with one-star reviews for his law practice; hundreds of people, including a mariachi band, showed up outside his apartment building to celebrate a festive Latin-themed party; more seriously, he was kicked out of his office space, and two elected officials filed formal complaints to the state court system’s disciplinary committee against him.

Like so many people who saw the video, I was quite shocked and disturbed by the incident. It was particularly unbelievable given where it happened, New York City. It’s supposed to be the most diverse city in the world. According to the Endangered Language Alliance, though there is no precise count, The Big Apple is thought to be home to as many as 800 languages. More than 176 different languages are spoken by students attending public schools in the city. Ironically, the lawyer caught in the middle of the controversy advertises on his website that consultations are offered in several different languages, one of them being, Spanish!

I think we can all agree that Schlossberg’s actions of berating people for speaking Spanish in public were inappropriate and wrong. However, while people may disagree with the way in which he said it, I think the content of his message may have resonated in some hearts, perhaps even some of you sitting here today. In fact, even though the United States does not have an official language, the vast majority of Americans strongly associate being American with speaking English. According to a study released by the Pew Research Center in February last year, nearly 9 in 10 people picked language as the most critical attribute connected to national identity.

The study also shows how people view the connection between English and citizenship can be strongly influenced by education, age, and faith. The older and less educated, and more religiously affiliated the respondents were, the more likely they were going to think that being a true American meant speaking fluent English. Yet, according to data from a Gallup poll from 2013, though most Americans believe immigrants should learn English, only 20 percent of Americans believe it is essential to learn a second language other than English.

Given where we are in our social context, I believe the story of Pentecost in the book of Acts has something important to tell us today. Because even though the book is named the Acts of the Apostles, it is really about the Acts of the Holy Spirit. So let's examine what the story of Pentecost has to say about how God sees our diversity.

In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus gave this command to his disciples, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." And, just as he had promised, the gift arrived in grand style on the day of Pentecost, which is a Jewish festival. The word Pentecost literally means fiftieth, marks the passing of 50 days after another important Jewish festival, Passover.

That day, Jesus' disciples and followers were together in one place, an upper room in Jerusalem. According to the author of the book of Acts, there were about one hundred twenty people gathered. And though today's scripture does not mention this, we can assume that "they were joined together constantly in prayer," as was their habit of devotion during the time of waiting. Suddenly, they heard a sound like that of a rush of violent wind. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest upon each of them. And then, filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in tongues. Through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, those gathered began to speak languages they had not learned and probably did not even understand. Yet, what they were saying wasn't entirely incomprehensible.

There were Jews who come from all parts of the Middle East to observe the festival of Pentecost. They were descendents of the Jews who had been scattered to foreign lands through cycles of war and captivity. Imagine their surprise as they heard the testimony of God in their native tongue, the language of their home countries. Although they were speaking in many different languages, the disciples were communicating to the foreigners who had gathered in Jerusalem the exact same message - God's deeds of power, the wonders of God. It was as if they were in the United Nations, where each delegate hears the proceedings in his or her own language.

Isn't it fascinating? God could have let the first followers of Jesus, those from the Galilean countryside, speak their own language and simply given those hearing them the ability to understand what they were saying. This would have been a great miracle. Imagine if you were in a foreign country and didn't know the language that was spoken there, and yet could perfectly understand what was being said to you in this foreign language! You would say, "Wow, what a miracle!"

But, that is not how the story of Pentecost unfolded. Instead, the miracle that was performed worked the other way. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples and followers testified in the different languages spoken by the foreigners who had gathered in Jerusalem. God did not speak to them in a special, divine language. Rather, God addressed them right where they were, in the comfort of their own, individual languages. Not only one human language, but in the diversity of them.

At Pentecost, God spoke in Aramaic, in Greek, and in many other ancient languages spoken by our ancestors. Today, God continues to speak to us in our native languages - whether it is in Chinese, in Spanish, in English, in Hindi, in Arabic, in Portuguese, in Bengali, in Russian, in Japanese, in French, in

German, in Korean, in Tagalog, in Vietnamese, in Urdu, in Krio, in Yoruba, and in the several thousand different languages found around the globe!

You might assume that those who were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost spoke the foreign languages flawlessly. But, I doubt it based on what the hearers had to say about their speech in verse 7. In amazement, they asked one another, “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?” Apparently, Jesus’ disciples and followers who came from the Galilean region were speaking the foreign languages with a Galilean accent. Perhaps this goes to show us that even the Holy Spirit cannot completely get rid of our accents. What a relief I’ve found in this new discovery! The good news here is that, despite their accents, the message was well heard and understood by those who had gathered in Jerusalem.

On the day of Pentecost, God made a clear choice. For the sake of spreading the gospel, God met our ancestors of faith by speaking the language most familiar to them. And God continues to meet us in this way, in the complexity and uniqueness of the languages we speak, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In *Feasting on the Word*, **G. Lee Ramsey Jr.** writes about this nature of Pentecost:

“What could be a more timely message for twenty-first-century Christians? The Word of God not only transcends cultural barriers, but it arrives in the particular language of each listener. Pentecost verifies Christmas. All wrapped up in human form, God comes to us in our very own bodies; God speaks to us our very own language(s). In an age of increasing cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and the perpetual rubbing of shoulders across lines of nation, race, and class, God offers authentic human communion. Through ordinary human speech, the Holy Spirit establishes unity amid diversity, a fulfilled promise that even the most divided congregations and communities can take to heart.”

Friends, Pentecost is not simply a day to remember and celebrate what happened in the past. The rest of the book of Acts shows us how Pentecost happened again and again in the early church -- how Jesus’ first followers, filled with the Holy Spirit, broke all sorts of barriers between them and so called “others,” how through God’s grace, they overcame their prejudices toward people from different cultures and religions and welcomed outsiders into their communities of faith.

Pentecost has happened again and again throughout Christian history, especially in the period of the Reformation. If not, the Methodist Church would not have been birthed. And Pentecost happened 50 years ago when two Methodist denominations came together, filled with the Holy Spirit to form the United Methodist Church. And Pentecost continues to happen in the church and in the world, even today.

I would like to end with this litany that **Dr. Tanya Linn Bennett** wrote several years ago, inspired by “Visions and Dreams,” the sermon **Dr. Albert Outler** preached for the United Conference of the United Methodist Church 50 years ago:

We gather in this time and place, all of us from different times and places, here to worship God. Many years ago, the people gathered and were ignited by passion for God, lit up by Pentecost fire, shouting out in Pentecost voices, carried away on Pentecost winds. So many years later, we gather. We have learned new

words, and written books of rules. We have heard the stories of our past. We come to create stories for the future.

Like those disciples so many years ago, we are not sure we know the way. We are afraid to make mistakes. We are afraid to fail. But, Christ calls us to carry on the blessing of discipleship, to move forward in love and faithfulness that all might find a place in our holy space, our church. So long as one of us is left outside the door because of our cold-heartedness, we are an unfinished church. So long as any one is lonely, hungry, sick, in prison, naked, we are an unfinished church. So long as any one of us is destitute of the great Hope that is our future in Christ Jesus, raised up to set us free from death into holy and everlasting life, we are an unfinished church.

Every day is a new Pentecost, full of the promise and possibility that God offers. Today is the day of dreaming. A Pentecost day filled with refining fire, and holy smoke winds of change, and voices full of passion for God and for each other. We are an unfinished church, but we are God's church. We are God's church, full of grace and love and hope. Today is a new Pentecost Day, may we be birthed into new beginning. Amen.