

PENTECOSTAL SPEECH

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Acts 2: 1 – 9

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(Pentecost)

So there they are – the now eleven disciples and some others who had followed Jesus – behind closed doors trying to figure out what to do now. It has been fifty days since Easter and the glow of that day has begun to wear off. The daily-ness of life is muting the joyful Easter “Alleluias.”

Oh, Jesus is still the risen Christ – a spiritual reflection of God’s present love. Yet, what are they supposed to do about it? They know they can’t go back to life as it was before Jesus. But what now?

So there they are, chins resting on their hands, looking at each other and thinking, “Gee, isn’t anybody going to say something?” The silence in the room is deafening

But sometimes silence is anything but empty. Silence can be the precursor to the in-breaking of something sacred. Sometimes silence comes just before a transforming event. And on that first Pentecost, after the silence comes a spiritual storm.

For God’s Spirit Power comes rushing into the room with such force that it’s like being hit with an unexpected gust of wind. Suddenly, without warning, these tongue-tied Jesus followers are telling his story in compelling and powerful ways. And not just to each other. They throw open the doors of the house and start inviting people off the street to come in.

And people do. People from everywhere come in. All kinds of people – Jews, Gentiles, women, men, children, slaves and slave owners, rich people on vacation and people who had been holding cardboard signs on the corners.

And when there’s no more room in the house, this Pentecost thing spills into the street, where ordinary people find themselves talking up a storm, each in the language of their own lives about what God means to them.

And it is spirit speech: speech that draws people together; speech that elicits as much hearing as speaking; speech that cuts through and transcends cultural, ethnic, political and ideological differences; speech that not only births the church, but brings about the miracle of human understanding.

It is pentecostal spirit speech – the Presence of God carried from one person to another in their words....

And it causes quite a ruckus – this Pentecostal coming to be of the church. There is enough commotion that some observers think it is just a drunken orgy.

I remember one Pentecost, greeting at the door after worship, and a child held up for me a picture he had drawn during worship. There was a church building with a cross on the roof and people running out the door with their hair on fire.

I looked at the picture and said, “Wow! Do you think their hair is really burning?”

“Nah,” he said laughing. Then he added, “But it was pretty exciting on the birthday of the church.”

He got that right. Whatever happened that Pentecost day, it was not a quiet birth. If the day began with those Jesus followers not knowing what to say, that changed when the Spirit wind blew and a pentecostal passion filled the house with a kind of spiritual fire.....

Ever been to a service in a church of the Pentecostal tradition? Congregationalists start looking at their watches after 50 minutes. In the Pentecostal tradition, the first hour and a half is just warm-up, as people sing at the top of their lungs, clap, raise their hands, stamp their feet, dance in place.

Then it starts getting serious. The shouting and weeping begins as people feel the Spirit. Some speak in tongues – rapid, ecstatic, mostly nonsensical utterances called, glossolalia. Others collapse on the floor, and still others kneel and hold the fallen ones. They call it, “being slain in the spirit.”

I remember the first Pentecostal service I attended. I was curious and wanted to see what it was like. Well, I felt paralyzed. It was so...so...uncongregational-like. I think I prayed, “God, if this is what your Spirit does, maybe I’ll pass for now....”

I have since come to know several Pentecostal pastors, who have taught me that Pentecostal worship is not religious crazy-making, but an outlet for people to express what is deep within their souls.

Well, our tradition and way is different. A Pentecostal visitor might think we’re a pretty “buttoned-up” bunch. But I think our life together is no less powerful or Spirit formed. Make no mistake, lives are transformed here.

And I believe we are also Pentecostal in our own way, because we too are given opportunities for spirit speech – speech that puts into words what we have come to know about God in our own lives.

I mean, maybe it will happen over coffee with someone, when conversation turns to religion, as it often does these days, as religion takes on new importance in the world. And over coffee you are asked about your faith. About why you are a Christian and why you are part of this church.

What will you say? Is it an uncomfortable question? Should you dance around it? Change the subject? After all, there’s a lot of stuff done in the name of Christianity that’s been harmful and makes people like us hesitant to talk about our faith.

Yet there you are. And I don’t know what you should say. But you’ll know. The words will come. Because I believe the Spirit will help you. And it will be a pentecostal moment.

Maybe over that cup of coffee you’ll talk about a really hard time in your life. And you’ll honestly share that you didn’t know how you’d get through it. And that you felt helpless. And then you didn’t feel helpless, because you had this empowering sense of God around you and within.

Maybe you’ll talk about that – what it’s like to be liberated from fear. And, you see, that would be pentecostal spirit speech....

Or maybe, you’ll talk about waiting on a street corner with a group of other pedestrians – strangers, people you didn’t choose, a group just waiting for the “walk” signal. And then you’ll describe how out of the blue, came this powerful sense that these people too are your family, kin, your sisters and brothers, created by God, each in the divine image, each uniquely loved by God, every one as important to God as you are.

In this world of so many boundaries and tribes and enclaves of self-interest, would talking about that almost mystical street corner experience be pentecostal spirit speech?

Or maybe across that coffee place table, you'll talk about a little boy you read to during Shelter Weeks here for the homeless. And how sitting with that child, you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his life with and in God has every bit as much dignity and beauty and value as your own adored grandson.

In this culture that has so many ways to measure people, and discount those who don't measure up, would talking about that Shelter child be pentecostal spirit speech, speech that participates in God's healing of the world?

I don't know what you'll say over coffee when your time for silence is over. But I believe you'll know, because the Spirit will help you with the words, just like the Spirit did on that first Pentecost.

Or maybe you'll talk about the key values that emerge from your faith: integrity, humility, patience, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, justice, respect for those who differ, love even for enemies. And you'll talk about how those values are at the core of all the world's great religions and are reinforced by your Christian, Jesus-focused faith, and how such a faith gives you a sense of inner peace and hope.

In this time when differences over politics and social issues and religion are becoming more vitriolic and hateful, when civility in public discourse is overwhelmed by rhetoric and politics of rage, would you talking about your faith values be pentecostal? Speech that is profoundly spirit-filled, Godly.

So I don't know what you'll say over coffee, or anytime really, when it's your time to put into words what's in your soul. But you'll just know what to say, because that's what the pentecostal Spirit does – empower us to say what we know about God.

And when that pentecostal spirit speech comes out of your mouth, maybe some will wonder if you should switch to decaf. More likely, what you say will be a pentecostal gift to somebody...somebody yearning to hear a word of spirit speech from you.