

**“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also are going to testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.”**

A few weeks ago I tore the old railing off of my deck. It just so happened that one of my children decided to have some of his friends over on Saturday night. So the timing worked well to have a bonfire with the railing that was going to get thrown out anyway. It wasn't too long into the night and I noticed that the fire was beyond a nice little campfire. Being the teenagers that they were, they decided to throw all of the wood on at once. They weren't doing it because they were cold. They were doing it because it looked cool. I had to go running out there to tell them to back off the wood before the fire department came.

This seems to be a good illustration for the way we should approach Pentecost. Do we become enamored with the fire and the flame of it? Or do we appreciate the flame not for the looks of it, but the warmth of it? God doesn't want us to be pyromaniacs. He wants us to use the flame of the Holy Spirit to be warmed with the salvation and forgiveness of Jesus, and NOT to be enamored with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's purpose is to point us to Jesus and focus on him, as a flame can give us warmth in a gentle manner without blazing out of control. How do we know this? This is what Jesus said in the Gospel for today. **“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me.”**

So we see that the Pentecost story quickly turns from the LITTLE flames of fire to the words and speech of the disciples. It would appear that the flames do not remain visible over the heads of the disciples, because they are never mentioned once the people get there to listen. Instead, the language is what draws the attention of the hearers instead of the flames or the sound of the wind. The attraction of Pentecost, the miracle of Pentecost, then comes through the words that are actually spoken and the content of those words, not the flames of fire, the sound of the wind, or even the language of the words.

#### Focus on Jesus through the Fire

But let's talk about the language for a moment. Language is important! Communication is key! When there is a lack of communication, it easily leads to suspicion and division. I used to work with a deaf man in Topeka. He was constantly feeling left out and suspicious because people would speak with each other right in front of him and they didn't know what they were saying. He would get angry and assume that they were talking about him when they weren't. It took constant effort to try and assure him that such was not the case. But because he couldn't hear, he assumed the worst. It was not easy to deal with. Think of when you walk by someone in the store talking a different language. If you see them laughing it makes you wonder, “Are they talking about me?” Even when husbands and wives are trying to communicate there can be difficulties. One might speak more through emotions and innuendo while the other likes to use plain words. He wants to hear “I love you” through actions and she wants to hear it through words. We don't always communicate the same, and it causes hurt and pain.

We can see from the Old Testament lesson, the story of the Tower of Babel, where this confusion of languages came from in the first place. It came from the direct intervention of God who actually CAUSED their languages to be confused. He wanted there to be this chaos of communication. The people had come together and coordinated to build a great tower up to the heavens. They were going to make a great and mighty city. They wanted to make a name FOR THEMSELVES, and this after God had just told them to FILL the earth. God carefully examined the situation and said, **“If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”** It would appear that God didn’t want them to succeed. He wanted them to fail. Their potential was too great.

Why would God WANT them to fail? If people were so self sufficient and so successful in building a home for themselves HERE on earth, then they wouldn’t see the need to have a home THERE in heaven. They would be filled with pride and self fulfillment. If people could make their lives so comfortable on earth, then they wouldn’t ever want to leave it. They would see no reason to pray. They wouldn’t seek a heavenly peace because they would have peace in the here and now. They wouldn’t see their need for a Savior, and they would comfortably slide into hell. It is as Jesus said in Matthew 19, **“Amen I tell you: It will be very hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”** So instead of tearing down their tower, God simply changed their languages and caused the tower to fall all on its own, through a division on the inside. God caused this confusion of tongues, this Babel, which Martin Luther said was in some ways worse than the Flood with all of the mistrust and wars that it has brought.

Yet God did this in order to bless us, so that we would realize that we can’t have peace and salvation in this world, and so that we would realize that we need Jesus to come down to us and for us. We can’t climb up to heaven. He must descend down to us and die for us to pay for our sins. This is the Word of salvation.

Pentecost is given in order to establish a means of communication so that we can be reunited as one. It is amazing how people can be brought together when you “speak their language.” There are catch phrases and terms that are used to either make you a part of a group or to castigate you in our society. LGBTQ. Acceptance. Tolerance. Hate. Love. Green. Conservative. Democrat. Republican. Black. White. Right. Left. Pro-choice. Pro-life. Christian. Muslim. Atheist. Believer. Unbeliever. Infidel. These are big terms in our society. They are used define who people are and what they stand for. They either make people angry or draw them together through definitions.

Sometimes the definitions are misunderstood. Sometimes they are redefined. This causes confusion. It causes suspicion. It can make enemies. Take for instance the way that Muslims view Jesus. They are taught they He was born of Mary, but as a result of God having sexual relations with Mary. That is in no way true. We call it a VIRGIN birth for a reason. Yet they are incensed because they believe Christians teach that God fornicates. Their definition of Christianity and of Jesus is skewed, because that’s how they are taught.

Think also about the concept of love. What is love in our society? It is tolerance and acceptance. Hate is not accepting someone or celebrating them due to their lifestyle choices or behavior. But that’s not how we are supposed to define love as Christians. We go back to the Bible, where God defines love as the sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world: sins which He condemns and hates. So hatred is conquered by a loving death that paid for our sins, not a loving acceptance of our sins. There are contradictions in terms and ideologies, and a

majority of the Christian community has forgotten what these terms mean or where they come from or why we speak them in the first place. Sometimes we speak past each other. Sometimes we are misunderstood and said to hate people because we want them to repent and believe. The sad thing is that these accusations are coming from people within the Christian community. We have a hard time communicating what love is in a world that doesn't define it the same way, and I can't help but think this is making Satan laugh.

So how can we have another Pentecost moment? How do we COMMUNICATE this? How can we bring the world back together that has splintered into so many different directions? Do we need a big wind to gather people together? Do we need another fire to land on our heads? Or do we need to take communication classes in order to make sure we are clearly defining what means what?

Think again about what Jesus said the Holy Spirit was being sent to do.

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Notice that last phrase - you are going to testify BECAUSE YOU HAVE BEEN WITH ME from the beginning. They SAW what JESUS did. They HEARD what Jesus said, within the context of what He was saying. The Gospel is the real life actions and words of what Jesus did on this earth to save us from our sins. It's not just words. It's history - HIS story!

When you examine Jesus' words in His ministry - His message was pretty simple. It was Law and Gospel. Repent and believe in Jesus. Time and again He told the people how they were sinning. He picked out even thoughts as sins. He called them to repent, just like John did. He told His disciples what He came to do - to die for their sins. They crucified Him on the cross. He died for the sins of the world. He rose from the dead. The message got out. And lo and behold, the people repented. They were baptized. They believed. The heart and core of Pentecost goes back to a simple message. It's not rocket science. It's a simple way of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

We live in a world where love is growing cold, as Jesus said it would. More and more people are falling from the faith. Is the remedy that we need more fire? Do we try to add more wood? Get more flash? Be pyromaniacs? Or maybe, like a campfire, you ought to just move a little closer to the fire, blow on it a little bit, open your hands to the heat, and enjoy the warm glow of the embers a little bit more. The wood is already on the fire. Stop looking for more fuel. Go back and look at the fire!

I think about how a local church loves to try and attract people to church through bouncy houses and two helicopter egg drops on Easter. How about preaching about a God who took on flesh, died on a cross for the sins of the world and rose from the dead? That sounds a little more exciting to me than some plastic eggs falling out of the sky with some chocolate inside. (Although I have a great liking to Heath bars in the afternoon!) Think of what set the hearts of the disciples on fire on the way to Damascus as they were walking with Jesus who had raised from the dead. They didn't even know it was Jesus, but it was His WORDS pointing back to the prophecies that set their hearts on fire. This is what Pentecost is about.

I just don't get how people can say that church is boring, when God Himself comes to us in the flesh and gives us His body and blood in the Lord's Supper. We are opening up God's actual inspired words - revealed to us

from heaven - and listening to Him speak. How can that be boring to you? We live in a day and age when people don't even know the Ten Commandments. They can't say the books of the Bible. They can't name three miracles of Jesus, much less three of His disciples. They can't define what justification is. They say that salvation is by being a good person - in Lutheran churches! Maybe it just comes down to the fact that they aren't reading their Bibles any more. They don't know God's Word.

If you're losing the fire, maybe you ought to just keep going back to the Word, going back to Jesus, and let Him speak for Himself. You've been trained in the Bible through your confirmation. You've been with Jesus from the beginning. But that doesn't mean the story is over. Struggle through it some more. Pray with it. Get into it and dig out the embers of the Word. Before you know it, the fire will be kindled again and going strong, one Word at a time.

We live in a splintered world, a world that defines each other by words and definitions. Right. Left. Conservative. Socialist. Capitalist. Liberal. Equality. Justice. But everybody seems to have their own definition of what they mean and what is right and wrong. People are confused. Without a clearly defined Word, revealed by God, we will live in confusion. We won't know what is what. There's no surprise that we are so splintered.

God defines for us the ultimate Word. His name is Jesus. When we know Him according to the Word, then we know what sin and grace are, heaven and hell, salvation and true faith. He is the One who calls us to Him in order to unite us and brings us back together as sinners who are forgiven and saved by grace. He is the heart and core of Pentecost, but so many people don't really know Him anymore. You can change that!

The fire department never showed up at our house that night. The kids stopped adding so much wood. They sat around the fire and enjoyed a softer glow as the night ebbed on, watching the red coals glow in their beauty. I hope they enjoyed it.

So it is with God's Word when Jesus is at the center. There is a beauty to God's Word. There is a fire within, showing us the love of God who took on flesh to live and die for us and save us from this world. Without the wood of the cross, there would be no fire of Pentecost. His love is what the Holy Spirit uses to set our hearts ablaze with God's love. Focus on Jesus through the Fire. Amen.