

# Sermon Text for August 19, 2018

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## *Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-13*

"What's wrong with these people?"

I've never been to camp meeting before. I went on Friday and spent an entire morning, with lunch included at a worship service, sitting on porches with a chair and talking, meeting people and reconnecting with some folks that I haven't seen in a while. People have been meeting at the Manor Camp Meeting for over 125 years. Bruce Gerlach and his family were some of the original attendees. It was all very nice and it was a wonderful experience, even one where I felt the presence of the Lord in a pretty tangible way.

Yesterday morning I went to Rough and Tumble where every year they ask me to open up the festivities, is that what they are?, not really festivities, but the events for the day on Saturday with prayer, so I did. Again here was another group of people who have gathered together for 70 years for a completely different purpose, but a purpose which united them and which has lasted for decades now. For both of these events there is some skepticism, a community of people living in tents or cabins together for a week is always going to raise some eyebrows. Others who have a gathering and list up walk behind machines as a highlight, some just might say, what's wrong with these people?

But we live in an age when the individual is everything, where your image is everything, isn't it nice to remember that people at one time put more stock in the group than in themselves. These gatherings in some ways remind us that we all don't live for ourselves, it isn't always about us, and there is value in community, there is value in gathering together and calling attention to what is important to us as a church, as a community, we've been doing it here now for over 185 years.

There was another group of people, some 2,000 years ago who also knew that they were living for something far greater than they were as individuals. The disciples on the day of Pentecost were huddled in a room. Jesus had just died and they didn't know what to do next. So they went and prayed. There was a circus performer called the great Santori who used to be shot out of a cannon into a small net waiting on the other side of the tent. A reporter came up to him and asked him how he did what he did every single day. Stuffed into a cannon, shot out and sail through the air. He said the flying through the air and being shot out of a cannon is the easy part.

It's the landing that's the hard part.

Isn't that the truth. The disciples for the past three years had been flying through the air and now it seemed as if they had landed with a sickening thud. Was it all worth it? A group was putting on a play where real life situations and tragedies took place and the climax was at the end of the play God descended from a wire suspended over the stage to make everything right in this person's life. Everything went as planned until the final scene when God was supposed to descend and make everything right, somehow tragically the rope got tangled and this figure who was to play God was literally hung by the rope and was suspended over the stage, only seen by the actors hanging. The director quickly whispered to the actors, God is dead, improvise the ending.

Have you ever felt like you were out there all alone and you have to make things up as they go along. I bet you the disciples felt that when up until the part that these verses in Acts come into play. In the midst of the confusion of Pentecost, in the midst of their prayer in a room by themselves, the church finds its origin. This is where it all began. That huddled, frightened mass of disciples was used by the Spirit of God to birth the church. For some that day the birth of the church gave them hope and confirmation. For others they were left with the question: What is wrong with these people? Let's find out what is wrong with these people, and let's pray that we have the same problems.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church. I want to give you some statistics that may be shocking to you. You have a 90% chance of being the same religion as that of the region where you were born. You were born in the United States, you will probably be Christian. You were born in Saudi Arabia, you will probably be Muslim. You were born in India, you will probably be Hindu. You were born in Japan, you will probably be Buddhist. You were born in New Jersey, you will probably be a Yankees fan. The same is true for socio economic conditions, of politics and on down the line. How we start off in life, how we begin does a lot to define who we will be and who we are. Some of us have to fight these realities in which we were born in order to find Christ and in order not to commit the same mistakes and sins of our forefathers and foremothers.

We find the same truth in the Bible. Think of the tower of Babel, our first reading, and we see how it did not start off very well. The entire project was predicated around what the people wanted for themselves. If you start something with your goal being your own greatness, it may succeed and do very well at first, but then after a while that goal, yourself, is unrealistic

and it will crumble. God had no part in their project. God basically came and said, I don't remember being invited, I don't remember you asking me from the beginning if I could be a part of this. The tower of Babel was a disaster because God was not a part of the building process. Listen to Psalm 127:1 "Unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labor in vain." The same is also true of churches.

The disciples at least had learned that whatever they were going to do next had to be told to them by God. That is why we find them in prayer at the beginning of this passage. Our Scripture begins with the disciples gathered together, praying, asking for God's intentions. They didn't know what God's next step was so they were going to keep quiet until they got an answer. They had no intent of starting small groups all over the world worshipping Jesus Christ until one day there would be over a billion practicing Christians as there is today. They had no idea, but they knew that God had a plan, and through prayer, they were going to find it out.

In the Scripture the beginning of things don't always go well. Remember Jesus' first sermon at his home town, you can find it in Luke 4:14-30? They first welcomed him as Joseph's son and even allowed him the seat of honor in the synagogue after he finished reading the prophet Isaiah. But then when he started to preach, when he started to interpret the Scripture they drove him out of the town and tried to stone him. The same happens here in this story. As the Pentecost story unfolds some are given hope, but others sneer and think the disciples are drunk, what's wrong with these people? Comes the question.

Let's see what is wrong with these people. As the disciples are gathered in prayer the sound of a mighty rushing wind fills the room. I don't know if you have ever been in a tornado before. I have not, but I have been to Disneyworld and went to the ride Twister so close enough? When you talk to people who have they say it sounds uncannily like a train filling the air. That's what happened, a tornado like sound without the tornado. Each person in that room then has a small flame appear over their head, almost like a marking. It makes you think of the blood spread on the door posts that marked the Israelites and saved them from the angel of death. Although here they are marked as people who were filled with the Spirit of life. They then begin to speak in different languages. By then a crowd of people who had come to Jerusalem to the feast days had gathered, it would be like a UN meeting without the political undercurrents, and each person heard the power of God being proclaimed to them in their own language.

This is not the speaking in tongues of I Corinthians 14 which requires an interpreter and is described as a spiritual language. Rather this is literal foreign languages that do not have or need an interpreter, but rather are understood by each person, each individual who speaks that

language. It was amazing. It was a miracle. Can you think of any better way for the church to start than with a miracle? Just as Jesus was born miraculously by a virgin, so a church was born miraculously through the advent of the Holy Spirit, such is Pentecost.

But the key to all of this was that this miraculous event created a community. A community that beseeched God's presence through prayer. A community began with God, ended with God, and included God in all of its decisions, and looked to God constantly and allowed God to create and re-create in their midst. God was placed first. Pentecost provides us as a church, provides us even more importantly as individuals, a humble realization that only God can give the church what it desperately needs.

For three years the disciples were flying through the air. Now they are praying: Lord, please, Lord, help me hit the ground running and never look back. As a church this story gives us hope, but it also challenges us. This is where the guilt factor comes in. As Presbyterians we are big on grace and guilt is hard for us to lay on others. But how much time have you spent praying for the church this past week? How much time have you spent praying for its programs, its people, the leadership, the officers, the deacons and Trustees and elders. The church is sailing with a full sail. It is flying through the air, but God has to be the wind, God has to be the one who is constantly catching us every step of the way as we go forward. This church cannot make it by the people who compose it. Only God can drive us and allow us to move in God's direction and not end up in confusion.

I love Pentecost. I get such courage from Pentecost. They really had it bad, the disciples did. No structure, no clue, no people. We at least do things decently and in order and we have books to help us grow a church and what to do when we've killed one. But it is not a book that makes this happen. It is Jesus Christ in whom we place our faith, and when we do that, amazing things happen. People will start to ask, what's wrong with us and we should be able to say Jesus, Jesus is what is wrong with us.

The church is made up of sinners. People who have something seriously wrong with them. Pentecost draws us together as sinners. For some the Holy spirit is wrath and confusion. If God is not part of our daily lives, in our jobs, marriages, families, events and activities, then only confusion will abound. For others, the Holy Spirit is a breath of fresh air, it is empowerment. It is a reminder that Jesus Christ is not dead. There is no improvisation taking place. If we leave it up to us we are in trouble. If we leave it up to God to birth in us what God wants, then get ready to hit the ground running. Amen.