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Acts 2:1-21  
The Miracle(s) of Pentecost

So, just in case you were wondering, this is not a Pentecostal church, by the modern day sense of the word. On most Sundays, your preachers here use a manuscript, and we don't have weekly outpourings of "speaking in tongues" and interpretations. We follow an order of service that's pretty predictable from week to week, and when the sermon or sharing time make the service go too long. Well, let's just say the feedback isn't usually an effusive affirmation of the leading of the Spirit when the service goes too long.

In fact, there is a time in the history of this congregation when the Parrot, the very symbol and incarnation of the Holy Spirit to the founders of this church, was used to shut down rambling preachers and worship leaders, not to encourage them to follow whatever inner urge they might have to keep holding forth for that last insight that's still unsaid. I hear that someone used to sit in the balcony, with a series of color-coded parrots on a string. These were dangled off the balcony to warn whoever was up front that their time was running out, or when it was all out, and when it was past out! Whatever the final color was, dangled in desperation, it apparently forebode dire consequences to the offender.

We are a church where we expect the Spirit to do most of her work in the *preparation* for the service, not in leading us off on too surprising a detour in worship. I do find it interesting, though, that the symbol used (jokingly, yes!) to keep speakers in line, time-wise and keep lunch appointments meet-able, was the symbol of the Holy Spirit, the parrot. Because one of the reasons CMCL celebrates the parrot as a symbol, is because it signifies and embraces our history of coloring outside of Lancaster County Mennonite lines. As a pastor, I confess I feel more at liberty crossing *theological* lines than *time* lines here at CMCL.

"Pentecostal" or not, I believe the Spirit is here at CMCL, but she manifests, or at least seems to be *understood*, differently across theological traditions.

As for the story of Pentecost for today, I grieve that Acts is the only book in the Bible that tells the stories it does. We think that the same author who wrote Luke also wrote Acts, but I find myself wishing to hear Matthew, Mark and John's versions of the birth of the Christian community, just like we have all of their tellings of the gospel stories.

Honestly, as I read commentaries on the Pentecost story, it begins to sound a bit like the controversy around President Trump's 2017 tweets in which his assessment of the inauguration celebration crowd size differed from some major media outlets. In Acts, the author goes to great length to emphasize the diversity of the backgrounds of the folks in the crowd at Pentecost. They were made up of:

<sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs

It seems clear that the author is really trying to emphasize the scale of the miracle — this wasn't just bilingual translation, but many languages and people. What was new to me was the fact that scholars find this list almost as bewildering as those people found Pentecost. Because the list the author gives here, as people out in that crowd, includes folks that apparently didn't make sense. The Elamites and Medes, for example:

“The Elamites were nearly wiped out by the Assyrians in 640 B.C.E. and were eventually absorbed into the Parthian Empire. The Median Empire entered into a political alliance with Babylon and was later absorbed into the Achaemenid Empire by Cyrus II. As a distinct ethnic group, the Medes had been extinct for over five-hundred years” by the time Acts was written.

This is where it feels like the conversations around inauguration crowd size. I find myself wondering what the agenda was behind the unlikely assessment of the crowd.

This would be like someone living now, exclaiming on how diverse their audience was by saying, there were Italians and Chinese people, Ethiopians and Ghanaians, and Prussians and Ottomans, too. Oh, and great turn-out from the Jamestown colony.

That's the thing about the “fake news” phenomenon, which in our day is a criticism leveled at and by both sides of the political spectrum. And once you see a chink in the factual facade, it's really hard to know how to read the rest of the story.

And this is such an important story. Pentecost is considered the birth story of the church.

It's when Jesus' words to his disciples (that the Spirit would come to be with his followers after he left them,) came true. It's when you begin to see who Jesus' apostles really DID think Jesus was, based on how they assembled the church/body of Christ.

Pentecost is when the group of Christ-followers begins to expand beyond the group of Judeans who were Jesus' inner circle, which is a really significant shift. Salvation being extended to people beyond the “chosen” descendants of the Children of Israel is a powerful extension of the gospel.

And yet, I read more and more biblical scholars, Hebrew and Greek scholars, Jewish and Christian alike, reminding preachers and whatever Christians they can gain an audience with, that we simply *must* give nuance to passages that dismiss Judaism, or make it seem adversarial to Jesus or Christianity.

Because today, Christianity and Christians carry a cultural power that modern Jews do not.

Anti-semitism never really stopped being a thing, even with the defeat of the Nazi empire. And it is rearing its head more boldly now, which is, frankly, triggering legitimate fear, as I hear it described by my Jewish friends and the authors I read.

So, I'm trying to be careful in how I talk about these stories, lest my naive theologizing lend credence to those who would seek to harm or undermine the Jewish community. We need to be mindful of the ways we unknowingly project ourselves and our understandings onto ancient texts, Not just because it can keep us from getting a sense of what was really happening then and there, but because our interpretations of ancient texts can deeply impact

lives lived now.

I know for myself, when I read Jesus's critiques of "Jews," usually "Pharisees", I almost subconsciously substitute generic "establishment religious leaders," and I think of the ways I both do and don't represent "establishment religious leaders" in my own context.

But throughout history, people (including, arguably, some of the Gospel writers) have very much *meant* Jewish leaders, specifically, and the consequences of that are that Christian theology has knowingly and unknowingly at times, underwritten violence against Jews.

This is not a technicality and it needs to be remedied. Just some full disclosure, as your pastor.

So, Let's unpack this Pentecost miracle. Today's scripture finds the apostles in a familiar place: an upper room. This is where they shared a last supper with Jesus, and they also fled to an upper room after Jesus' died. They were filled with fears, but the risen Christ found them there, showed them his wounds, and they believed.

Here they are again — Jesus has literally just ascended to heaven in the previous chapter, and they're back up in an upper room.

They don't really have an expansionist vision at this point. In fact, they're literally drawing lots between two men to decide which one should replace Judas, so that the disciple count can now be back at the proper #: 12. (Spoiler: Mathias wins).

It reminds me of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Jesus is like the man who went on a journey and entrusted his servants to wisely invest his talents in his absence. It seems like the disciples are headed down the path of the servants who were afraid to lose what they were entrusted with, so instead of investing it, they buried it for safekeeping. There they were, with the gospel safely secured, "buried," in the upper room with them, hoping only to preserve it just as Jesus' left it.

They are such fellow humans in their predictability —making the same choices over and over again!

But suddenly, there came among them a sound like that of a mighty, violent wind coming down from heaven. And something rested on each of their heads — a *tongue* that resembled a flame. And suddenly they're all filled with the Holy Spirit, and speaking in languages they never learned. And, without warning, there's a crowd, when in the previous sentence they were in an upper room. But there they are, this crowd representing the incredible diversity of the wider Jewish community in Jerusalem.

And each individual in the crowd hears reassuring words of God's love in their mother tongue. Everyone was amazed, and rightly so!

This scenario is actually a preacher's *fantasy*. You get to preach from your own pulpit, with only your regular church members present, and suddenly the Holy Spirit comes over you and your congregation, and literally gives you the words you need to communicate God's love to people you have almost nothing in common with.

I grew up with the notion that if you were a good Christian, your life would

just be so appealing to others, that they were stop you on the street to say, “I’ll have what she’s having!” and convert to Christianity on the spot. Witness evangelism, I think we called it.

Pentecost is that story on steroids — it’s like your church service suddenly breaks out into a musical. You discover that the walls of your sanctuary are really a moveable set piece, and now, they’re swiveling away to reveal a crowd outside on Concord and Orange. And, even though we didn’t practice, we’re all dancing and singing together songs we never learned, and crying happy tears and feeling known and loved and heard.

This is what we really would love to have happen — have a Universal Translator like they have on Star Trek, or the Babel Fish in *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, so that we can keep saying what’s comfortable to us, and others’ will hear it in words that are comfortable to them. Yes, that would be perfect. No discomfort for anyone!

Maybe the Pentecost miracle is just that people ended up talking to people who were different from themselves at all ... and because they were speaking authentically from themselves, others could really see them, could see themselves mirrored in them.

These instances of successful communication are miraculous

I experienced a minor miracle recently — around a song I wrote, which ironically is titled “No Miracle.” I wrote it after a hard day as a chaplain in Atlanta 10 years ago, wondering what, if anything, I had to offer to the folks I was serving when I couldn’t offer the cures and healing they desired. There’s a lot of religious language in the song.

Well, a young man who was high school student, but whom I had pastored when he was a kid, heard me play that song all those years ago. Unbeknownst to me, he had remembered it after all these years, and earlier this year, he invited me to record it with him and a bunch of his musician friends in Brooklyn. I was, and am, stunned, that this song would strike a chord in someone the age and demographic of my friend, Luke. That it spoke to him as a 17 year old, and that it continues to speak to him now.

But I think part of the miracle in our connection through that song was that I did not write that song *attempting* to communicate something in a particular way to a particular group of people. I wasn’t trying to convince someone like Luke to see something the way I saw it. The song literally poured out of me because I needed to say it, and without even knowing it, I was speaking Luke’s language. But it was also mine. I just didn’t know we shared it. I was bewildered and amazed, though.

I do think music and the arts lend themselves to Pentecost miracles.

Another aspect of the Pentecost story is that the disciples began to speak about who they knew God to be, but *not* in Hebrew, the language of the synagogue and the Torah, but rather in languages that people used in their everyday conversation. This is one of the more unique features of Christianity — that we are a religion that welcomes worship in mother tongues, and welcomes the translation of scripture into mother tongues.

One of the marks of the Spirit, though, is that it can often be mistaken for foolishness.

And sometimes I think the Spirit is here to make us dumb. There's a story we were told at our wedding, and I think I've said it at every wedding I've officiated, which is this:

Life is one dumb thing after another.

Love is two dumb things after each other.

Because any two people connecting, whether it's a romantic, erotic or platonic connection, requires being dumb — dumb enough to be the one to initiate a conversation or follow up, dumb enough to reveal your interest and your heart. The Spirit at Pentecost made the disciples reveal themselves. It took them from an upper room to a crowded street, what would have felt like an unnecessarily dumb risk had they thought of it only minutes before. It made them behave in a way that people wondered if they were dumb. *Are those guys drunk?*

And yet, being dumb is exactly what they had to do in order to make the connections that were actually the wise thing all along.

I don't know how we continue to claim Pentecost now. I do think that the Spirit helped the disciples, in part, by getting them to do something they seemed to fearful to do: speak to others. And the Spirit brought about another miracle that day, which was getting a crowd of people to *listen*.

I hope that the disciples also learned to be good listeners, not just speakers. I hope that the connections that were forged that day, by no effort or virtue of theirs, were ones that they made effort to sustain. I hope they didn't all pass each other in the street the next day, and exchange furtive "morning after" vulnerability hangover glances. I hope they didn't squander the matchmaking of the Spirit, but instead built relationships of mutual understanding and actually learned the languages they'd been freely given that day.

As the book of Acts continues, it says that believers *did* grow in number and did share all things in common, which to me might be more miraculous than Pentecost: that, according to the story, old and new members to the community did the work of community together well.

May we be good stewards of the Pentecost moments we're given!

1. CMCL services are actually supposed to be 70 minutes — there's a common misconception that we plan for an hour and miss egregiously every single Sunday. Not true, just FYI.

2. Jacob Myers, "Commentary of Acts 2:1-21." *Working Preacher*. May 2, 2012.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1296](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1296)

