

THE PENTECOST PARABLE

Texts on Pentecost Sunday

June 12, 2011

Genesis 11: 1-9; Acts 2: 1-21

Pentecost is often called “the birthday of the church.” Congregations get into the thing with cakes and candles—*how oh-woold are you?*—and streamers and balloons. Happy anniversary, another year come and gone! But there’s a problem here. We are thinking of the long ago Pentecost event like the hatching of an egg from which the chicken of the church sprang and grew to lay more eggs, which became more and more chickens, laying more and more eggs, till there were hundreds and thousands of them, of which we are one, hatched in 1930.

Now, babies and pets, corporations and nations have birthdays. All things “of the flesh,” in the Bible’s ancient phrase—things that come and go the way of all the earth—have birthdays. But if we, members of the body of Christ, are born “not of flesh, but of water and the Spirit,” (John 3:5), then *this* body is a spiritual body and it simply cannot have had a natural birthday on which it was plopped out into the daylight of history a blinking wet chick. If the Church lives in the Spirit, no ordinary principles of life keep it alive like a body or a plant, but rather, the church lives only by receiving the gift of the Spirit—in the present! So true church has no single birthday. And conversely, whatever churchly things do show up from week to week and year to year—the buildings and bylaws, the endless meetings, even the traditions—are not the church. They are vessels. Now, the Spirit of true church needs a vessel, like a flame wants a wick. But God’s church has been held in thousands of very different vessels. Not one of the vessels was the church.

Of course it is a joy to read again that the Spirit put Peter in that square that day. But do you think the Spirit can’t peter out in our day? “The wind blows where it wills . . . You do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) If we hope that God inspires the church, let’s be sober-minded with the metaphor: God also expires churches which do not receive the Spirit. Let us then leave the birthday bash behind. May Pentecost become for us the parable of how God gives birth to the church, whenever in divine mercy, God comes upon God’s people in the power of Holy Spirit to beget God’s Christ anew.

So what does the story tell us? Let’s listen more deeply into it. Unlike our forebears, who really leaned into the Bible narratives, who knew them all and listened to them as a whole, we who know not much of the stories or how they came to be have a grave disability. We tend to listen as we might to the evening news, supposing we are getting all we need to know from the

nice news people. It is not so. We need so much more.

In the sequence of stories in Genesis, the tale of the tower of Babel is the last of the legends from the timeless past. From Genesis 2 through 11—Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, Babel—all the stories have this character: They offer a way to understand why things came to be the way they are. Why is there pain and hard labor and death? Why is there violence and murder? Why is our life on this earth so vulnerable? Why are we humans scattered in a thousand factions who cannot understand one another? Then, after Babel, right at the opening of Chapter 12, we meet Abraham. You could say, we meet Israel's story about how they heard the divine command to mend the shattered, scattered generations of the earth, the *tikkun olam*. Now, it was Israel who set the book of Genesis in this order. Israel wanted to say something to herself by telling the tale of the tower of Babel just before introducing Abraham: The languages of all the nations of the earth may be confused, but we are not confused, says Israel, when we listen like Abraham to God's command to go from our comforts and our traditions, to risk everything for the sake of the generations to come. God's word can work.

Luke (the author of Acts) now does what forebears in the faith had long done. He takes that old story of Babel and tells it again for a new people. I call this "the twice-told tale." It is one of the most startling and meaningful patterns in all the Bible, wherein a spiritual guide moved by measureless love and concern for his own generation reaches back into memories and songs long gone dull and sets the old lyric to a new tune. Here, Luke takes the tale of Babel and runs it like a backwards movie. Like that video clip someone made of our bombers flying over ruined lands sucking destruction and death back into their bellies. Pentecost is like that. It is Anti-Babel.

In Genesis, Babel was the last word about a scattered world before the first of Israel's servants heeded God word, Pentecost is the first word about a glad, re-gathered Israel before servants of all nations begin to heed God's mending word, to make a world where there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free—but all are made one in Christ. Pentecost is the end of the curse of confusion and hatred among all tribes. Arrogance had gone amok in Babel's heaven-scraping spire. God saw that "nothing they propose will now be impossible for them" and scattered them. In Christ, shattered humanity is healed. "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed," says the Lord, "you will tell this mountain, 'Move,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matt 17:20) The curse is done.

Part of the Pentecost parable is this demonstration of Luke's joyful creativity. Be freed, then, from down-loading religion and its doctrines and

narratives like correctly copied digital files to be stored and memorized—or mocked by those who think they have outgrown religion. Why, four hundred years ago, the Christian contemplative Jacob Boehme summarized this decadence of ordinary church teaching with one word: *Babel!* He defined Babel as “purely conventional outward Christianity based on mere historical belief,” including, he happened to add, all speculation about the end times. Babel is all efforts to sit in certainty of having the right facts and the right beliefs that give privileged access to God’s goods. So much babble.

Let us say it again. Along with the Bible entire, think of the Pentecost story not as a news report of what happened one day. Rather, there is much more power for you in understanding it as a thorough, free re-shaping of some event into a story which the church could actually pass along about Holy Spirit presence and power. Therefore, don’t just pass it along. Take the freedom God gives you wholly spiritually to re-imagine and retell the stories of your people to bring light and hope and power and possibility. For that, we have been saying “Take your crown!” But there is more here.

Who speaks in this story? Who hears? You could say the apostles are given the power to speak, and the pilgrims who have come from far lands hear. But that answer is just painting by numbers. Speech, especially public speech, is a social and relational event. A society’s theory of power is coded in the kinds of public speech it allows. Why else is a soapbox deemed a dismal spot for a speech, except that the society will not grant access—power—to the man on a rant?

In the Pentecost story, ordinary power relationships are flipped. In Jerusalem, it’s the season of a great annual pilgrimage. These travelers from the far corners of the Mediterranean have money and places to go and people to see. Peter and the apostles are Galileans, Jews with no prestige or power, just visiting in Jerusalem. Now, these powerless men receive power to speak. The powerful receive another kind of power—the ability to lend and bend their ears without cynicism—most of them, anyway. Those accustomed to setting and practicing the traditions listen. Those once used to being told what is so and what to do now have the ability to speak in ways that powerful men can hear. That is the Pentecost parable. If we have power, in the ordinary social sense, the word we need to hear for our own salvation, will come to us through the voices of people long silenced—people who have no power. The miracle of Pentecost will come when we who have power are so moved by Holy Spirit to silence our ready tongues and to move our often lazy limbs into the places and spaces where our ear, all alive, will open to hear the word of the least and the last. Then is Christ born anew.

Every time I pass by the women and men assembled to receive food from our pantry, I think —*We feed them, but do we ask them to feed us?* Perhaps those of you who share the ministry do do just that. Whether yes or no, it is not my intention to point a finger. How could I? In the matter of having privileged access to speech in this organization, I am first among sinners. My intention is therefore not to accuse, but to use the pulpit to trouble the waters, to disturb the soil, that a seed might fall into new depths and there germinate God's future. I am praying for a Pentecost church, a church more and more willing to take off whatever old garments we can, whatever assumptions we have about our way of doing things, in order to go freely to the least and the last, to people who are not here, to kneel at their feet, to listen and learn from their lives so that we might all together be changed.

Unless Christians let God shift the ground of our being in this way, opening dialogue where there was only monologue and control, I think there is no possibility that the immense machinery of economic exploitation, endlessly inventive of evils from war to prison to ghetto to farm policy to environmental destruction to . . . I will not go on with that tragic litany. It comes to this: If the people of the churches of this land cannot be moved from their tired babble and monologue to enact the parable of dialogue with the oppressed, then God Holy Spirit will move on to find a vessel that can hold the light and the vision and the speech. Churches will be museums.

And it comes to this. People are watching. Years ago, a small band from my Buffalo church went every Wednesday to a vacant lot in that city's east side underside for a bible study, outdoors, May to October. We always had extra chairs. Sometimes a resident would stop and think with us. After a couple of years, a man stopped me on the street. He said, *We may not visit with you, but we're watching and we thank you.* Now, the Riverside Church is being watched too. We have a strange relationship to the whole nation's perception of what is possible for liberal Christianity. I may overstate the case, but try my hypothesis. For many who are watching, if Riverside can't do it—can't get beyond its factions, scattered as if they spoke different languages, unable to hear; if Riverside can't take it to the streets, that good news of listening with power to the people—then it's not going to happen from the churches. God's gone elsewhere. Will you live the Pentecost parable?

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*