[**Genesis 11:1-9**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 104:**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141#psalm_reading)**31-35**

[**Acts 2:1-21**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141#epistle_oth_reading)

[**John 14:8-**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=141#gospel_reading)**24**

**THE PENTECOST FAMILY**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Happy Pentecost, everybody!

It doesn't have quite the emotional charge of Merry Christmas, does it? Or even, Happy Easter! If you say to a stranger Merry Christmas! Or even Happy Easter! You'll probably get a friendly response.

But if you walk into Walmart and say to the clerk as you're walking out, Happy Pentecost!...she's apt to give you an odd look.

And yet Pentecost is right up there with the most important Christian holidays; a few like Sheryl might even put it at the top.

And I think that's one of the most remarkable things about Christianity, that it has so few festive occasions. Not because it's not a festive religion, but because it's a religion, first and foremost, not of holidays, but of day to day life. It's a religion, not of constraints, but of freedom, a religion not of schedules but of spontaneity, not of repetitive drudgery, but of creativity.

Other religions are to a large extent held together from the outside, so to speak, while Christianity is held together from the inside. And I think that's the main message to take away from the group of readings the lectionary offers for us for Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit and its animating presence within every Christian is what animates and sets apart the Christian community, as well as what gives that community its power and its promise of eternal life lived in the present, not just in the afterlife.

We see that spirit being established at the center of our life in the famous passage from Acts included in our readings for today - a passage that's read every year at this time – in which we learn about the occasion when the spirit descended like fire upon those gathered there and had the immediate effect of … of what? Even that's not entirely clear, but it had something to do with language. One possibility suggested by the passage is that they started babbling incoherently like drunken sailors at nine in the morning; another is that they suddenly started speaking in foreign languages.

Since all we have to go on is this passage in Acts, there's really no way of knowing which happened, or maybe something else. Luke, the author of Acts, wasn't present, so he's obviously repeating an account or accounts he heard about something that happened thirty or forty years earlier, and maybe those accounts themselves were unclear or conflicting, and Luke just decided to leave them that way.

Again, we'll never know. But what we do know with certainty is that something happened on that occasion that served to unite the followers of Christ in a special way, and that also served to empower them for their special mission of both living and spreading the Gospel into the world.

The importance of that special empowerment is foreshadowed in the story we read in the early chapters of Genesis about the so-called Tower of Babel. Setting aside the historical accuracy of the story, it contains at least one common-sense truth, namely that human cooperation is greatly hindered by the failure to share a common language. But I think the story points to an even deeper truth, and that is that there is a fundamental isolation to human existence, even when there is shared language.

The simple fact is that everybody occupies a unique point of view, and that point of view can never be escaped and can never be shared. Even if I put an experience of mine into words and share the words with you, I'm not actually sharing the experience, only a report about the experience, like sharing photographs of a vacation.

This is a necessary condition of being alive; but of course ordinary life does offer some opportunities for softening or ameliorating that condition. Close friendships and love-relationships of various kinds do so to varying degrees, but perhaps nothing quite equals family relationship for approximating what truly shared experience would be like. Family members are truly 'of one spirit' in a way that even other loving relationships, or at least most of them, can only approximate.

And I think what happened on the Day of Pentecost can most helpfully be thought of as the birth of a new family, the family of Christians, a family of shared Spirit. That is the Spirit that Jesus promised His disciples in the passage from John we read today:

*This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

In Matthew 12, Jesus Himself offers in indication of this tremendous gift that will be given to all Christians. When asked about His mother and brothers, He answers in this way: *“... stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*

In Christian teaching, we are warned over and over again against pride, and that is certainly a warning we should take to heart. But there is a big difference between being prideful and simply acknowledging reality. The child musical prodigy who recognizes her own talent is not therefore being prideful: she's just recognizing that she's been given a special gift.

We've discussed before from this pulpit one of those special gifts given to Christians, that of being able to forgive the sins of others, that is, being authorized to forgive the debt someone else owes to God for some harm that person has done.

The events of Pentecost disclosed another one of those gifts to all Christians, that of being brought into a family relationship with each other, not just metaphorically, but spiritually, that is, at the level of the deepest and truest reality. When Christians refer to each other as brothers and sisters, they are not simply being friendly, they are being accurate, they are referring to a real relationship that exists by virtue of their shared spirit, the spirit of Christ. It is a relationship that is as real – that is in fact more real – than the shared gene pool that unites biological siblings.

The problem in thinking this way about the gifts we have as Christians is that we're often not really aware that we have them, because they're not accompanied by any particular feelings or thoughts. But that's deceptive. The gifts of the spirit are not like the gifts you find under the Christmas tree. They are more like authorities and relationships we have, whether we're fully aware of them or not.

Take the gift of being able to forgive others in God's eyes. Until we discussed it at some length here from the pulpit a while back, many of you were probably unaware that when you forgave someone for something that person had done to you, you were in fact forgiving that individual's debt to God as well as the debt to yourself. You were, in fact, doing the same work as Christ. That was happening, whether you were aware of it or not, simply by virtue of your authority as a Christian. That is one of Christ's gifts to His followers.

Of course, once you become aware of and convinced of that authority, you will perhaps find some greater motivation of exercising it. Just as a child who has a talent for music but is never really made aware of it might, once it is discovered, begin to really devote herself to its development and enjoyment, so also, once we become aware of this unique authority we have to be of great spiritual use to others, we might begin to actively exercise and maybe even enjoy this tremendous spiritual gift.

And similarly with the gift of being brothers and sisters in Christ.

If I may draw an analogy using our dear sister, Sheryl. We all know, I think, that Sheryl was adopted at a very young age, and for most of her life remained unaware of her biological family. Then in very recent times, through the phenomenon of DNA research, she was able to come into contact with various members of that family.

The point is that even over all those intervening years, her biological family had existed, she had simply been unaware of them. The relationships were still real, just unrealized.

Just so, even though many Christians remain unfortunately largely unaware of their actual sibling relationship with each other, that relationship is nonetheless real, as real as – even more real perhaps than – Sheryl's were with her biological family.

The hope and expectation, of course, is that once we become fully awake to our relationship with each other, that new levels of empathy and understanding and concern will also become accessible, just as they have done for Sheryl in recent months.

Paul comes back to this theme again and again. To the Romans, he writes:

*Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.*

And to the Corinthians:

*If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together....I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment....Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*

Paul was deeply aware, not of how much Christians were just like everybody else, but of how different they are from everybody else. It is not prideful to acknowledge and appreciate and cultivate the gifts that make them different; it is in fact the instruction of Christ to do so. Christ did not say *I am****a****Way*; He said, *I am****the****Way.*

One of the great challenges for Christians in the modern era, I believe, is to remember and value who we really are, how we are a Special People, set apart from the rest of the world, and endowed by our creator with special gifts and special responsibilities. The great pressure in the Western secularized world is to make all truth subjective, all value human-derived, and to deny the reality of a spiritual identity that lies deeper than the identities of genetics and social dictate. Christianity stands in lonely opposition to that pressure, when among other things, it teaches us that, once we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior, we receive His own Spirit, and thereby become members of His own family, joint heirs with Christ of God's Kingdom.

And so, Gracious God, our prayer this morning is that You make us fully aware and maintain us in that the awareness that we are brothers and sisters, not just in a manner of speaking, but in the reality of the Pentecostal Spirit, the true reality that flows from the living and eternal grace of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.