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## Divided Tongues

### Acts 2:1-12 and Genesis 11:1-9

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Pray with me please (from Psalm 104) The earth is full of your creatures, Lord. when you give to them, they gather it up. When you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth... May my meditation be pleasing to God, for I rejoice in the Lord.

We gather today. All together in one place, on the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost, the festival of *shavuot* or weeks, sanctified in the shared life of God's holy people, handed on to each generation in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy and in the celebrations of this pilgrim feast. Fifty days earlier God's people celebrated Passover, remembering their life on the run, the miracle of their freedom from slavery. And with that feast they also witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fifty days between Easter and Pentecost are days of growing. Days of maturing. For the first followers of Christ and the other Jews of their time, Pentecost was the day God's people gathered to celebrate harvest – the fruit of what has been planted and nurtured. Before tasting this bounty they bring their first fruits and first loaves to God's holy temple, to give thanks for the blessings God has rained upon them and the blessings God has caused to grow from the earth. On this festival day God's holy people have made a pilgrimage to offer these gifts back to God.

One more thing about Pentecost. The fifty days of Pentecost mirror the fifty years of the biblical jubilee, the year of restoration, freedom, and salvation (Lev 25:10). Pentecost sets God's people in motion toward the salvation of all the earth.

And on this Pentecost day, says Acts chapter 2, the followers of Jesus were all together in one place. Jesus has ascended to heaven. The last words he spoke to his followers before he was lifted up were a promise: "you will receive power when the holy spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." A group of followers, about 120 men and women (1:14-15), wait now for this gift.

Their gathering for this feast, and the gathering of their fellow Jews in Jerusalem, testifies to a further hope: a hope for the unity of God's people, a hope for the ingathering of all who have been scattered: captives, soldiers, exiles, refugees, migrant workers in search of labor and food. Israel's prophets foresaw a future when God would gather in God's people like the harvest, and make them whole.

But it is not yet time for the gathering in. The followers of Jesus *begin* together in one place. They *begin* speaking one tongue. They *begin* sitting down.

Then the Holy Spirit comes in. It comes in when they don't expect it. It comes in suddenly. It is loud, impossible to ignore. With a noise like a violent wind, just like a wind that could tear the roof off the house and send the people inside spinning to the ends of the earth. Like a wind that could overturn tables, breathe new life into God's people, and renew the face of the earth. This Spirit comes in like a wind that will knock down walls and start mixing people up.

It fills the entire house that holds them – every room, every corner. Then *divided tongues* appear; they are like fire; and in a brief moment of stillness, those tongues sit on each gathered person, each of these 120 men and women. Divided tongues. I want to stay with this phrase for a moment because it is a strange one.

Let's start with the first word. What does it mean that these tongues were divided? We hear this word and we start thinking mathematically. We start thinking that when you divide a number, it gets smaller. But here's the thing. We aren't talking about a number. We are talking about the Holy Spirit. We are talking about

the infinite power and wisdom and saving love of God. These do not diminish. There is no greater or less in the Holy Spirit.

And when we track the root of this word “divided,” in Greek *diamerizomenai*, through the scriptures, we find it has a different connotation. A form of the same word (*diamerizo*), appears again later in this same chapter in Acts, in verse 45. There we are told that among these first Christians there was no one in need whose need was not met. Because this community held their possessions in common and it says, they “divided” them among all, each according to their need. Dividing their possessions made possible a *koinonia*, a sharing of gifts and blessings to meet the needs of all. This passage sheds light on the connotation of this word and suggests to us a less poetic but more accurate translation: “distributed.” Tongues distributed to each and to all.

And I can’t get past the implications of this word. Just as there is not a person in the community of these first Christians who has a need that is not met, there is not a person in this house who does not receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift passes no one by.

When Peter explains to the crowd outside what has happened to them, he says that what has happened in this house is what is written in the book of Joel. Joel declared that this Holy Spirit would be poured out on all human beings, sons and daughters, young and old, slave and servant, so that all begin to prophesy, behold visions, and dream dreams. And Peter now proclaims, this is what has happened. The days have come. The Spirit has been poured out upon us.

And he tells the people outside the house, people who weren’t there inside when the Spirit came down, that through baptism you also will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is for you, and it is for others, those who are near and those who are far away (2:38). Because this is the Spirit that comes in like a violent wind, ready and able to break down the walls and blow the roof off the house. This gift of the Spirit can’t be hoarded or contained.

Now this second word, “tongue.” When we visualize this scene, we usually picture a flame, because the scripture says, it is a tongue as of fire. But can you hear that it doesn’t say it is a flame. It says it is a tongue.

A tongue. A tongue is an organ. It is a muscle. Okay, technically it is a muscular hydrostat, with no fewer than eight muscles that allow it to change shape and position. And this supple, shape shifting hydraulic muscle system is a sensory organ that helps us to taste and to savor, to gain knowledge about the world around us and about that which nourishes us and keeps us alive. This tongue will give us knowledge and wisdom and insight about the word of God and about the world into which and the people to whom the word has come. And this tongue makes it possible for us to speak, to declare God’s word with clarity, in plain language that all can understand, to testify out loud to the forgiveness of sins, to bear public witness to the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Now what does it mean that this tongue is as of fire? We know that it is not a flame, it is an organ of sensation and speech, but it is like a fire. Because these tongues have the power to ignite human hearts and minds and to spread until the whole world is blazing with the vital heat and light of God’s word.

And these tongues as of fire settle in. They don’t settle into a place. They settle into the people. And that means they are going to move. So when the Spirit decides to settle in, look sharp. Some exciting things are going to happen. God is going to move things around and God is going to move you. God is going to empower you and enlist you, and you are going to change the world (cf. Acts 17:6).

If we look forward in the book of Acts, we learn more about this gift that God gives when the Spirit comes in and the tongues take a seat. It is a gift for healing (Acts 3:1-10; 10:38; 14:9), for comfort, for peace (9:31).

But it is also a gift of boldness (Acts 4:31) and courage to testify before tribunals, governors, and kings. The ones who first received this gift were ordinary people. They did not hold academic credentials (Acts 4:13). But they became teachers and preachers who would not be silenced. Authorities bound them and flogged

them and commanded them to stop teaching in Jesus's name. And they declared their obedience not to human authority but to divine authority and they rejoiced in the Spirit and kept on teaching (4:18-20; 5:27-31,40-42). When they preached in public, there were times when the men in the crowd very deliberately took off their coats and carefully stowed them, because they had decided they needed to move their arms freely so they could kill the one who declared the resurrection of Christ (7:58-59; cf. 22:20). And in the face of such danger, the Spirit's gift of boldness led these followers of Jesus to keep preaching, even when it meant their death.

Time and again in the Book of Acts we read that those who received the gift of the Holy Spirit and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ were persecuted. And when they were persecuted, we are told, the Spirit did not draw them together for safety and protection. The Spirit scattered them (8:1-4, 11:19, 13:50).

And with this scattering we become mindful that the dividing of tongues holds one other meaning. Those who receive this gift begin to speak in different tongues, the languages of the earth. And with this detail we hear an echo of the first occurrence of this word "divided" in the Greek Old Testament, the Bible of the New Testament writers.

That word, "divided," has its first occurrence in Scripture in Genesis 10 (v. 25), after the flood, when God has commanded the children of Noah to fill the earth (9:1). There in chapter 10 we read of 70 nations, 70 peoples descended from the children of Noah, each with their own families, their *own tongues*, their own lands and nations. We read that the earth itself has been divided, and the very plurality of these peoples and tongues is a hallmark of God's blessing. It is also a sign that they have fulfilled God's command to spread throughout the earth (10:32) and care for its welfare and that of its creatures.

But in the very next verse, in the passage you heard this morning from Genesis 11, something has shifted, or we have moved backward in time, for the families of the earth are not scattered and they do not have different lands and they do not have different tongues: The whole earth had *one tongue* and one set of words (Gen 11:1). This one-tongued people migrated from the east, away from Eden, and they settled in the plain of Shinar, and there began to build a city and a tower *so that they would not be scattered over the face of all the earth* (11:4). This city-building, this tower-building, answers no call from God; it conveys no blessing to the earth and its creatures. It neglects the commission God has given to all humankind.

God distracts this one-tongued humanity from its single focus, its narrow ambition, its tower to the sky, by turning one into many. God introduces differences so great that peoples can no longer understand one another. And God scatters them over the face of the whole earth (11:9).

These echoes reverberate in our scriptures today. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus's followers begin all together in one place. And then the Holy Spirit comes in and fills the whole house in which they are sitting and divided tongues as of fire settle upon each one of them. They are filled with the Holy Spirit and they begin to speak in different tongues and yet they have power now, ability, capacity to speak plainly (*apophtheggesthai*). It is the opposite of the confusion of Babel. It is purposeful speech. It is clear speech. It is speech that knows the divisions between us and yet is not afraid and not confused.

And we have heard that these people who gathered in one place, as you have today, who sat in one house, as you do today, would not stay in this one place for long. Because the Holy Spirit does not stay still. The Holy Spirit moves. And the Holy Spirit spreads and scatters and sends.

We call Pentecost the birthday of the Church. We know it best as the day the Holy Spirit came down and filled the house and filled the people in the house. Today we are in that house, and the Holy Spirit comes down and the Holy Spirit fills us. And so I warn you now. Tongues as of fire have descended even upon you. You have already received this gift. You are called to see and to speak, to heal, and to set free. And so it is time for you to prophesy. It is time for you to declare the Gospel. It is time for you to testify and to preach. If you think that is not your calling, think again, because this is the gift of our baptism and these tongues pass no one by.

The Spirit has a plan. The Spirit is going to set you in motion and spread you and scatter you. The Spirit is sending you. For Pentecost is above all the day of commissioning. It is the day when the Church – this Church - receives its mission to be witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and God's work of salvation.