

**Holy Spirit
Don Lincoln
Acts 2: 1-22**

My friend John lives in the same house as his father John and his rambunctious, three-year-old son John. Three generations of John, all under the same roof.

One day he heard the phone ring, and his mother answered.

"Hello?"

The person on the line obviously said, "May I speak to John, please?"

His mom replied: "Which John would you like to speak to? John the father, John the son or John the holy terror?"

Which is a little bit of how most of us feel about the Holy Spirit described in this passage. And those of us who journeyed through the charismatic renewal movement in the church remember it – it can be a little frightening. Tongues of fire; rushing wind, a church so stirred up people think the disciples are drunk at 9:00 in the morning. If you've been a Presbyterian for any length of time, you know that this is just way too messy for Presbyterians! Someone once said the only thing Presbyterians have in common with Pentecost is the letter "P".

But do you and I really get the point of what happened that day? The Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak the languages of the people who were there in Jerusalem. In the middle of an international crowd in Jerusalem for the festival, with many different languages, the disciples could suddenly communicate with everyone.

Too often in the church we think it's the other way around. We wait inside our own sacred space – "upper room" – wait for people to come to us – and expect them to listen to what we have to say in OUR language. The people there that day did not learn to speak the disciple's language. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were equipped to speak theirs!

In every age, the spirit has sought to equip the church to speak in the language, the context, and the culture of the day. Thirty-seven years ago when I started ministry as an associate pastor in a large church in Charlotte, NC, the head of staff insisted that in my pastoral prayers, I use Thee and Thou when speaking to or of the Almighty. I tried it for a while, and then politely said to him, "I can't do this." I didn't grow up with that language; it's unfamiliar to me and to most of my generation; and one of the reasons you called me to be here was to try to reach out to my generation that's not all that present in the church, and I'm not going to do very well if I speak to them in archaic forms."

We purchased a new hymnal in this congregation in November. We've tried to balance the selection of new and old hymns. I've heard a few complaints – not enough of the old ones. But I always like to remind folks – the old hymns were actually new hymns at one point in time. Newfangled, different, unfamiliar. And a month or so ago we sang one new one and I had more positive comments on that new hymn than I've had on any hymn in the last ten years.

Whether it's the music we use, or the forms of our worship, the topics we study, who we ordain to ministry, or the theme of our vacation bible school – the Spirit longs to equip the church in language and form that speaks to – and speaks into – the rest of the world. That's one of the reasons I love the variety of worship expressions and style in this congregation. Something I am convicted about. The search committee knew that when they called me here 17 years ago. I have said from the beginning, "It's the message; not the medium; it's the content; not the container that counts."

Clearly our ways of communicating are changing every day. I can't keep up with it. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Every time I start to get just accustomed to one some new online platform shows up and my children have to explain it to me. But are those perhaps the ways in which the Spirit is bringing us to new Pentecost moments?¹

A colleague's friend told about the time she came to church, sat in the pew, and as she waited for worship to begin, got out her phone, opened her Facebook account and "checked in" at the church. The woman sitting next to her shot her a cold look and said "church is not a place for cell phones." But that check-in on Facebook sent a message out beyond the church's walls, telling friends and neighbors "Hey, this is my church... that's where I am right now....and you would be welcome here, too."

That's one reason we hired Lynn George as our communications director a year ago. Because unlike when I began ministry, it's no longer just a printed newsletter, once a month. There are so many ways to communicate. It's why this Fall we will be streaming live our morning worship online – so you can be anywhere in the world, and still worship at Westminster.

You know 11:00am when I grew up was THE sacred hour for worship. That was the REAL hour; that was the big worship, that was one where the choir sang. Do you know how we got 11:00am? 11:00am became the sacred hour for worship years ago because people needed early morning to milk the cows and feed the chickens. That's how we ordered Sunday!

Today, 11:00am is too late in the morning for most folks. Back then, nothing was open on Sundays so you wanted the day to linger awhile. In this day and age, it is different.

The Spirit continues to move to enable us to speak in a new way.

Scottish theologian John Macintyre once spoke of Pentecost as "**the wholehearted expression of the unlimited imagination of God.**" Listen to that again.

What a great thought. The Holy Spirit is the imagination of God, let loose in the church and in the world.

On Pentecost, we celebrate the infinite possibilities of the Spirit. And the power of the spirit to send us into the world – equipped in each new age and every new generation. Not so they can understand what we're saying in our language but so we can speak the Good News to them in words they will hear and understand.

May it be so.

Amen.

1. The Rev. Emily C. Heath, Congregational Church, Exeter, New Hampshire; "Still Speaking" online devotional.