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In the Language of the Spirit

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Apostles 2:1-12

My Dear Brothers and Sisters!

It's a true pleasure to be with you today, and to bring you the joy of Pentecost. I have to be honest with you, I love this congregation, because you always bring your warmth, love, and candor. This congregation got that Spirit. If I might say so, there is more spirit here than in those who flail their hands over their heads, and move their bodies in ecstasy to show that they are overcome by the Spirit.

Pentecost is richly instructional, as, on one hand, it points out where we came from, what was our origin, our provenance. On the other hand, it points to the direction of our

future progress as a community, and as individual members. Let us take a step by step journey through the event of that Pentecost, and let us meet head on it's most pertinent messages for our times.

1.

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place." Fifty days after a breakup or a funeral is plenty of time for us to understand that we are left on our own. That's precisely how the disciples felt after the death of Jesus. The fact that they had to evade the watchful eyes of the Empire that ordered the execution just aggravated their feelings of being orphaned, being abandoned, and being isolated. For sure, we could tell our own stories about those kinds of feelings. Under the circumstances the disciples stayed together under one roof for the celebration Feast of the Weeks. Luke, who wrote the Acts of Apostles, starts the narration as he would talk about a class reunion. The pupils from the past have gathered. I remember my first class reunion. When we graduated we all enthusiastically talked about how we can change the world, but a mere 10 years later all of us were discussing workplace issues and the trials of married life. Then came the 25th year reunion where the midlife crisis took center stage with conversations about divorce, and whether we ought to explore the calling of a new true love. From the room next to us I could overhear the conversation of people at a reunion in their 60s, and they were discussing the impossible task of raising grandkids, and the many versions of back pain. The nature of class reunions is that travelers of a shared time capsule get together periodically, and they measure their lives against the lives of others. What brings them together is a kind of homesickness: they want to come back to a community where they feel they naturally belong without being questioned or rejected. However, as the years go by we might slowly become convinced that such a belonging was artificial. At the bottom of our hearts we feel we no longer belong. Where, then, do we belong?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters. During the summer our entire church is loud with the noise of children and youth camps. I observed an interesting duality on the younger campers. One day I saw Pete sitting next to the fence, crying. I went there and asked him: is there anything wrong? Did somebody hurt you? Is there something you don't like about the camp? He answered sobbing: "The camp is just fine. I just miss my home." He liked where he was, but at the same time he was missing home. What an easy task it is when the location of home can be identified so precisely. A short while ago I spoke with an elderly church member. What she told me was intriguing, and gave me inspiration for this sermon. She said: "Reverend, the other day I washed my face, and just stood in front of the mirror watching the water droplets rolling along the grooves of my wrinkles, and I felt like an orphan. I was looking at this aging body, and a sense of homesickness came over me. The homesickness then became overwhelming. "Where were you born?",

I asked. She answered: "It's not because of a place, my dear. It's something different. It's like someone feeling homesick all their lives."

The theologian in me perked up. My God, this simple woman expressed in one sentence what Augustine, the Hippo, expressed in an entire book. The idea that our heart remains restless until it finds stillness in God. Since that time I understand that Tamasi Aron's adage "we are in this world to find our home in it" is not about an actual physical location. I mentioned those previous experiences of mine, because I'm convinced that the story of Pentecost answers those questions you just heard about our being. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Suffice it to say here that the first class reunion we call Pentecost didn't proceed as expected.

2.

The story of Pentecost incorporates three symbols, each connected to the central message.

a, The first symbol is the wind storm. "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. " In the Hebrew language the word "ruach" means both wind and the Spirit of God. The world is sustained by that invisible, but obviously effective force. The breathing of people is directly derived from this, as people stay alive as long as the Spirit of God resides in the body. So, we may express this by saying that people are Holy Spirit manifested in a body, or we may express this by saying that people are bodies animated by the Holy Spirit. We have then a religious celebration that begins with the usual monotony, and then it is enlivened by an unexpected wind storm. That wind storm is the very forceful streaming of the Holy Spirit which, and this is important, fills the entire home and everyone present. Luke chose well the introductory scene: the wind is an excellent symbol of something powerful, unstoppable, something that changes the world, something that upends the status quo. In our churches on Education Sunday it is well to remember that when our church was born, it was born of that power. The way God breathed life into the church at Pentecost is reminiscent of the way God breathed life into our world during Creation. Here it's well to remember that in our personal lives the biggest changes weren't born out of gentle summer breezes; rather, those changes were born out of freezing wind gusts of crises in our lives, and out of wind storms that rearranged the landscape of our lives and tore into the edifices we thought were shatter proof. And we didn't request any of those winds, but they surely filled our lives.

b, The second symbol is the tongues of flame. The Greek original of this text may be more accurately translated as: "Then divided tongues appeared to them, split like tongues of fire, and they descended on them." (KN).

When Moses was beginning to comprehend that the entire world is emblazed in the fire of the Holy Spirit, he saw a burning bush permeated by the Holy Spirit. When the story of Pentecost unfolds the flames descend on all who are present, all present became a burning bush, all present became the locus of commitment, all present became the receptacle of the Holy Spirit. Until then the Holy Spirit was carried only by a select few. Now the Holy Spirit has overflowed to fill everybody. I don't know how megachurches handle this, but in my ministry I bring it to the attention of everybody that after the confirmation all unitarians become full fledged apostles. They all become bearers of God's Holy Spirit, with all the accompanying rights and responsibilities. If the story of Pentecost ended here, then we would have nothing more than a charming story of how an entire community was filled with the Holy Spirit. However, whenever the Holy Spirit fills someone it is not there to make us feel comfortable, like some kind of a drug. Rather, it is there to spur us into action to apply ourselves in the service of the Holy Spirit. So, the story continued.

c, The third symbol is the "tongues". "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." Here the same word "tongues" is used, as before in the "tongues of fire". This is the origin of the Christian tradition of "speaking in tongues" or glossolalia, most typical of the Pentecostal denomination.

In his First Letter to Corinthians (chapter 14) Paul warns that glossolalia may be useful only if it is interpreted, as the audience may perceive it as nothing more than unintelligible gibberish. One expert (Thiessen) opines: "Glossolalia is the play on phonemic elements of the speakers' mother tongue". The free, but meaningless dance of the sounds.

When we focus our attention on the events of that Pentecost we'll observe that something different is going on there. What we'll see is that Pentecost is not about the frenzy of ecstatic gesturing and not about glossolalia, but Pentecost is about the miracle of love that transcends the differences among a variety of people. In other words, Pentecost is the testimony to that ministry of the church, which is the love that reaches us despite differences in our languages. Or, if you like, the experience of love that is shared trans-linguistically.

And that is precisely what we observe: everybody heard it in his own tongue.... It seems like Luke wants to express that the chaos of Babel had come to an end; while the shared language was shattered at Babel, and nations no longer understood each other's words, now we are beginning to comprehend the existence of a shared language that is behind all those multitudes of languages. Once they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they could then talk, so everyone could understand them. No matter if they came from Parthium, from Medea, from Elamia, from Mesopotamia, from Cappadochia, from Ponthus from Egypt, from Asia, or from any other location, they all experienced the same. They all heard it in

their mother tongues as the Apostles declared the wonders of God. They all heard it in that true mother tongue, in the language of the Spirit, using the grammar of the heart.

3.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters! The 2nd chapter in the Acts of Apostles is the only passage in the Bible where multitudes of people is described before a message is presented. It didn't happen by accident, as the multitudes of people eventually become part of the message: their diversity, and their commonality in spite of their diversity. We read in the textus that at the Pentecost people were present from all corners of the world. No wonder that all nations may claim that the spreading of the Gospels started with them. Africans claim such thing, and so do the Syrians, the Asians, the Libyans, and, of course, the people of Jerusalem. Quietly I have to admit that sometimes even Hungarians claim that as well. The pride of each nation is justified, and that is an additional aspect of the miracle of Pentecost, a consequence of the descent of the Holy Spirit.

We must grasp the following: The miracle doesn't mold all participants into identical beings, rather, the miracle made them understand each other despite their differences. The meaning of Pentecost is the forming of a Christian community that rises above all that is diabolical, above all that segregates and divides. The meaning of Pentecost is not conformity, not uniformity, but the harmony over differences.

Recently I spoke with a prior member of my church, a friend who no longer attends our services. He told me he is no longer unitarian. And why not, I asked. I was prepared several possible answers, but not for what he told me. He said: Because unitarians don't have enough of the Holy Spirit. What could he have possibly meant? Was it that we don't recite Hallelujas, or that we do not rise enough times during services, or that we don't clap and flail our arms over our heads, or that we don't speak unintelligible tongues? My first instinct was to argue the matter with him, and ask him if he read the Gospel story of the baptism of Jesus, and whether he read any recitation of Hallelujas there.

The I pondered why didn't he see, and sometimes why don't we testify to the miracle of the Holy Spirit that appears among us. For example, when, despite our diverse opinions, we can still come to an agreement at our board meetings, or when, notwithstanding our differences in our family background, our birthplaces, our level of education, our hearts still beats as one for our beloved faith passed on to us by our ancestors.

No doubt, there will always be people who are overly critical, who withdraw from us, whose hearts are divided, who don't act. However, our church has never been defined by them. Rather, our church has been defined by those who could speak in a way that

others could understand. Why don't we see, and why don't we testify about that very Holy Spirit that now just as centuries hence has been breathing life into our communities, that gave us goals and the perseverance to reach them in the face of demoralizing circumstances, that gave us loyalty to counter individual selfishness, that maintained our convictions despite of doubters, that gave us the will to be agreeable despite our differences.

It is unfortunate that many religious communities that call themselves Christian, are still busy at dividing us based on our differences; their authoritarian directives would tell us whose beliefs are right and whose are not, whose lifestyle is right and whose is not, and who is voting the right way and whose is not. We, unitarians, understand that a church cannot possibly be a community where we all speak in identical voices. That is why we like to hear multiple voices, that is why we encourage the expression of individual personalities, that is why we refrain from disparaging the convictions of others. We have grown to understand that our unity is not the uniformity of the individual opinions, but it is the unity of our spirit.

We have grasped that the first Pentecost, as Luke described it for us, might be considered the largest class reunion in history, and one that was free of prejudice. Pentecost didn't happen only to clique of people, didn't happen only to people of shared ideology, didn't happen only for the Parthians, Romans, Jews, or proselytes. And let me add here the Cretans, as our Mothers always warned us, children, about them (ie: Titus chapter 1, verse 12) , as they had the reputation of being pathological liars, vicious beasts, and always hungry slouches. It is my firm belief that our church can renew itself only when it can again host class reunions, gatherings that are free of prejudice. It can renew itself when it can invite to these gatherings the wealthy and the dispossessed alike; invite both the entrepreneur and the poor pensioner who became the victim of the changes in the political system, and now faces a hopeless situation; invite the father who is raising his kids on his own in a family unit that is labeled broken; invite the couples who are raising many children to replace the parents and to increase the size of the nation; invite the people who chose not to have children because they wanted to pursue personal ambitions, or they may have delayed having children, and now it's too late to start; invite the tattooed and the quiet emos; invite the disabled and the people in hospice; invite the Parthians, the Medeans, the Edomians; invite even those who have a drinking problem, and they are in denial; invite the school teachers who are so disappointed about the educational system, that they long forgotten why they chose this profession; invite the emergency medical personnel who have seen so much horrible injuries; invite the healthy and the sick, invite the ones on the right and on the left on the political spectrum, invite the beautiful and the drab; invite the tall ones and the short ones; invite the girl who is moving abroad, and the boy who no longer finds anything worthwhile; and invite even the Cretans. Let us invite all of them to the reunion of the church, the reunion of our church! Would something like that look normal? No. Would doing any of that be free of risks? No. But doing all that would be by the Spirit!

4.

In the last part of the story of Pentecost, and this how I'll be closing my sermon, the people outside the building notice that something unusual is happening inside. Religious celebrations aren't supposed to sound like that. Hearing how the disciples spoke, the conclusion from the outside was "They have had too much wine". In other words the people on the outside thought that the people inside got drunk. One of the important, and also light hearted, moment of the Gospels is when Peter defends the disciples. He stands up and says that those people aren't drunk, as it is still very early in the day. This is the third hour, which is 9 AM. Thus, we know that by 9 AM of that day something visibly changed about those people; there was something different about them.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters, we often ask ourselves just what are the signs when we are overcome by the Holy Spirit. In other words, what it looks like to be filled with the spirit, to be spiritual. Would we be performing miracles or speak in tongues?

Could the answer be something very simple? Could we be filled with the Holy Spirit just based on how we are early in the morning? When we are tired, exhausted, broken and unenthusiastic? When we go to work with bitterness and reluctance? In those early morning moments we are not filled by the Holy Spirit. Then again, the answer could come through the eyes of the outsiders: what's our mood, and how we look at our lives. Can we comprehend that in spite of distracting surroundings this is the way God destined for us? It's always this very day! We are filled with zest for life, as we would be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Could the answer be that we may begin to speak in language never studied and we never thought we could speak? A language that everyone understands. In the language of the Holy Spirit, using the grammar of the heart. We must make an effort to acquire that language, and at least once in a while talk to each other in that language. Because we are all homesick for that language; we are homesick for it throughout our entire lives.

Amen.