

Pentecost 2018 (May 20)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

They would not listen to God. They had been taught what was right, and wrong. They saw how some people followed God's commandments, and were blessed. They saw the horrible, violent, deadly, destructive results when people do *not* follow God's teaching about good and evil.

They had seen individuals who did things the right way. They saw wholesale sadness and devastation when people do what's wrong.

And still – *they would not listen to God.*

This story is as modern as the headlines from Texas, Toronto, Syria or Indonesia. And it's as old as the Book of Genesis.

In the 11th chapter of Genesis, we hear about a group of people who would not listen to God. They had decided that they knew better. They did not need God's instructions, God's definition of right and wrong.

They knew better.

They did not need God's instructions – instructions about how to live justly, to teach children and adults self-control and selflessness, to cherish life and reject violence.

They decided that they could 'do life' without God. In fact, they thought that they could be their own god!

So they decided to build themselves a tower - a tower so high that they would be 'up there,' up where 'the gods' live. With this tower, they were literally putting themselves above God, taking his place in their own minds.

But, in the Bible, things never turn out well when humans decide that they don't need God, and that they can take God's place, and that they don't need God to teach them right and wrong.

So, it didn't turn out well for these folks who were building themselves a tower. Perhaps you've heard of this tower – *the Tower of Babel*. Genesis 11 tells us this story, because it's a powerful narrative about human arrogance.

And by the end of that narrative, something critical has happened to humanity. Up to Genesis 11, human beings spoke the same language and were united in a similar culture. But as a result of the sin of Babel, humanity is divided.

We no longer knew each other's languages. We could not understand each other. When you cannot speak, when you cannot understand, there is usually confusion, anger, mistrust, hostility, fear.

And that's how things stay, until our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2.

Notice how things start on that Pentecost Day. Jerusalem is full of people from all over the known world. They came from many nations. They speak different languages. It's a city full of foreigners who have different cultures and assumptions. Jostling and confusion.

In the midst of that confusion is a small group of Christians who are unsure of what God is going to do with them. They are together, waiting.

Then there is the sound of wind, like the wind which blew across the waters of creation, like the wind that blew back the waters of the Red Sea so that the people of Israel could move forward toward freedom.

Then Holy Spirit is unleashed upon that small band of Christians. They groped for language to describe it. They said it was 'like tongues of fire.'

Tongues of fire. Sound familiar? Remember when Moses encountered the burning bush? There was fire, and the voice of God. And by the end of that conversation, *Moses* was on fire with an unexpected mission... to lead the people out of slavery!

Tongues of fire. The Spirit speaking through a group of Christian people who, up to this point, were frightened. The authorities had killed Jesus. "Would they kill us?"

The Gospel tells us that those first Christians had the doors looked on Easter Sunday – *because they were afraid*. Along comes Jesus, *breathing* his love on them. By the way: in the Bible, the word for 'breath' is the same word for 'wind,' and it's the same word for 'Spirit.' Jesus gives them his Spirit. They are no longer afraid. They understand their mission.

Back in Jerusalem on Pentecost, that wind, that spirit, that fire, took hold of those frightened Christians, and they become bold proclaimers of Jesus' message.

And what happens? *Everyone can hear them*. Everyone can *understand* them. That crowd of

strangers who had filled the city, that crowd who could not understand each other, suddenly find that the walls of division have come tumbling down.

The terrible divisions which begin at Babel are healed in Jerusalem. The things that made human beings unable to know, understand and respect each other, are overcome by the uniting message of the Risen Lord.

All the destructive things that happen when we will not listen to God; all of the results of our disobedience; all of the tragic outcomes of our violent desire to live without God's guidance... are overcome by the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God. The Christian community was aflame with passion, because they knew that the Risen Jesus was breathing within them.

Now, I wish I could say that things stayed that way. But we human beings seem to keep returning to our primordial sin: *we will not listen to God*. Even in the early decades of the church, there was division – because people listened to their fears, their arrogance, their pride, more than they listened to the Gospel of Jesus.

People do not listen to God. So we live with a human conundrum: when we listen to the Lord, when we pay attention to his breath at work in us, we have experiences where division give way to unity, and confusion gives way to harmony, and misunderstanding gives way to compassion.

But all we have to do is watch the news in order to know: people still do not listen to God. They listen to their fears, their angers, their inner demons. They listen to their own arrogance, their pride and judgment. They listen to the voices of family and culture, who teach us whom to hate, and how.

They soak in the violent images of video games. They hear the lies of the abortion industry, which tells us that the death of someone else is the solution to my problem. They are bombarded by Hollywood's glorification of gun violence and a life unhinged from God, morality and family.

We see the sad and tragic results. The Tower of Babel is not just in ancient Babylon. Babel can be found in almost every human heart.

Until... until a small community of Christians says, "Something better is possible. We do not have to be afraid. We do have to bold."

And our courage is born when we learn to listen. Sometimes, the Spirit of the Living God sounds like a strong wind, coming in to blow away the waters of the sea, the obstacles which keep us from moving forward.

Sometimes, the Spirit of the Living God sounds like a gentle breath, breathing peace upon us, the

kind of peace that Jesus gave to his friends on that first Easter Day.

And sometimes the Spirit is like the tongues of fire which teach us how to speak the truth of Jesus in a world where so many other voices speak lies.

When those apostles experienced the power of the Spirit on Pentecost, there were very few Christians, and there were tens of thousands of confused people around them. But those early Christians did not sit back and say, “there are too many people, there are too many problem, there is too much confusion.”

No. They listened as God spoke to their hearts. And they opened their mouths with the message – the message that can heal the world.

This Pentecost Day, that same Spirit is ready to speak *to* you and *through* you. And the first step to you being set ablaze with your mission is... for you... *to listen*.

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