

In Their Own Language
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Philippians 4:2-7, Acts 2:1-13

Nomadic primitive peoples used to carry a live coal around with them in a hollowed-out bit of wood or shell so that they would always have fire available. Having fire meant the difference between life and death. Today, we turn a dial on a stove, or we push the button on a plastic stick, and a flame pops out. We are masters of the flame, because we have domesticated and tamed it. But for all this, we still can't summon the fire of the Holy Spirit at will.

The fact that God's fire does not come at our beck and call seems right. Although, I'd sure like the ability to bring down sacred fire in this sermon. It's been a flamethrower of a week, hasn't it? As if anything I might say could burn away all the intractable cycles of violence that hold our world hostage.

What does it mean for us to sit here and remember that God's Spirit was poured out on folks in Jerusalem in Scripture, when today the city is filled with protests and violence? Between the celebration in Jerusalem, and the bloodshed in Gaza and the West Bank, it seems like there is no one who is willing to communicate across the divide, to bring about a future that will give dignity and hope to all people.

Another school shooting, this time in Texas, makes 22 just this year in the United States. Santa Fe High School student survivor Paige Curry said: *"It's been happening everywhere. I've always felt it would eventually happen here."* Everyone knows their dance steps for this, right? We start with "thoughts and prayers", which sound nice on the surface but quickly moves into blaming the survivors. From there, we will argue about whether mental health or guns are the true cause. We don't get anywhere, because we refuse to hear one another's language amid our own pain, outrage, loss and fear.

But then I remember, after all, that God is God, and I am...not. And how hypocritical it is for me to want to want to call fire down on people's heads... God's fire is frightening. It is frightening, because God might come at any time, without warning, in the middle of dinner, when things are good and peaceful and just the way we like them for once. With the ringing phone, bringing heart-breaking news. Or God might never come at all, though we sit in the stillness, and cry and plead.

On the day of Pentecost, they were there from "*every nation under heaven.*" 120 followers of The Way gathered together to celebrate the harvest festival of Pentecost, which recalled the giving of the Law at Sinai 50 days after Passover for the Jewish people. Tons of people gathered together, when little tongues of flame started dropping out of the sky and setting them on fire. Just as Jesus had predicted, the Holy Spirit descended on God's people and burned them something fierce.

After that fire, they were able to do the kinds of things Jesus did, which was exciting: they could make the blind see and the lame walk, they could speak in foreign languages they never had before, without a quick-study foreign language program!

Not just some kinds of people, but all different kinds of people, people from different places, with different languages and customs, different cultures and backgrounds and experiences, people with different economic realities, different physical abilities and genders and races and orientations, all different kinds of people, beloved of God and filled with God's Spirit, a new creation just as it could and ought to be. Women led, the poor were fed, a new community exploded into being as their tiny church became a megachurch overnight!

But there was a shadow side to the gift of the Spirit. There always has been. To whom much is given, much will be demanded. The early apostles were banished, imprisoned, or executed. The prophets of today are silenced in one way or another. And so, maybe we are right to be cautious when God shows up, in burning bush, pillar of flame, the funeral pyre Abraham approached on which to sacrifice his only child.

The dancing flames of Pentecost are not safe, because we know we will have to sacrifice something to receive this gift. We want a God who comes on our timetable, and who always comes to make life sweeter. Think about what it is like to eat a strawberry straight from the field. Eat it slowly, let the flavors develop and unfold. This is the sweetness of sunlight turned into sugar.

Last year my son confessed to me that he had purchased online some dried ghost pepper chili, with the purpose of challenging his friends to try and eat some. And they did, in the Masuk lunchroom, which caused a number of them to be tremendously sick. All the milk in the world didn't seem to put that fire out! Maybe it's a teenage boy thing, but his curiosity and desire outpaced his good sense.

After I was done laughing at his retelling of the story, I gave my son a lecture about making better choices. Later that night, he told the story again to his father who said *"Uh, don't do it again. And hey, next time we go shopping I'll get some hot sauce and we'll really see whose boss!"* That's when I realized: I married the guy who likes fire and heads into it.

When fire breaks out, we are trained to close doors to keep it from spreading. Some of us know, because we have encountered the fire of God, what it is like to leave all of the doors inside of us open. We know that if we leave every room available, that fire will tear through our whole being, and destroy everything flammable.

Ask anyone who has been burned in life and yet managed to see just what God was burning away. Ask someone who has had their heart broken and mended, who has gotten sick and healed, who has gotten drunk and then sober with God's help. Ask any mother who has given birth, especially without benefit of epidural. It burns. All of it burns.

And yet not one of these people, who understand that God's fire is not safe, would prefer the alternative. The chilly absence of God, the safe but lonely life, the heart unbroken that has never known love. Do you really want your sweet without your spicy?

For me, the most exciting and interesting work of the Holy Spirit is its third action on Pentecost Day. By enabling the people present to speak different languages so that non-Aramaic-speaking people could understand the message, the Holy Spirit breaks all kinds of barriers, frees the gospel from a particular first-century Galilean rabbi to a universal message of hope and salvation for all people.

It's the people of God who take center stage, their hair tussled and singed, staggering a little, bolting out into the street, talking a mile a minute...and being understood by pilgrims from all over the place, in all those languages birthed at the Tower of Babel — whose ill effects are now being reversed.

In the psalms (67; 72; 117) we find a vision of God as the God of all nations, of all peoples, of all the earth and its inhabitants. We find the same theme repeated in the Prophets, especially Isaiah (2:2-4) and Jeremiah (3:17; 4:2-4). The gospels tell us that Jesus repeatedly reached out to the marginalized, the poor, the sick, the social rejects, women, foreigners, military, non-military, known sinners, the religious, and the wealthy.

The miracle of Pentecost goes so far beyond tongues of fire and a rushing wind. Indeed, throughout the rest of Acts, the apostles engage in proclamation and mission that *goes out* to people of all nations, that *accommodates* different diets and cultural practices, not demanding that converts come to them, but rather, bringing the good news of Jesus to meet everyone *where they are*.

Language is certainly about being understood and understanding. It's about learning and communication. But it's also about so much more than that. It's about hearing and being heard. It's about seeing another person for who they are as a unique and valued child of God, not as an obstacle to be overcome.

The call of the Gospel is to speak God's word of love in as many languages, in as many ways, with as much passion as there are stars in the sky. The miracle of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit *comes*, the Holy Spirit speaks to us in our *native* language—the language of our dreams, and the Holy Spirit bolsters us to engage in bigger realities of peace because of her presence. May we have ears to hear. *Veni Spiritus*. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.