

Gathering the Scattered
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A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Day of Pentecost, 6-9-2019
Acts 2:1-21

Scene One:

When the primordial flood subsided, Noah's clan inhabited the earth once more. God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill up all the lands."

But Noah's descendants were ambitious. "Come, let us make a name for ourselves," they said. And from Babel, there rose a great city with an even greater tower. Brick by brick, story by story it grew. The tower grew so high it reached the heavens. With significant fortification, and a grand tower, the people of Babel would be safe. "We won't have to worry about being scattered," they said, "We'll be safe, and protected, and important, and special."

But the tower grew too high, and the people grew too bold, and one day, the Divine Council said, "Oh no, no, no, this just won't do. Humanity is not meant to be like this. If this behavior continues there will be no end to their vanity." And the Lord confused the people's language, and they were scattered about to all the regions of the earth. And the once-proud tower collapsed like a game of JENGA.

Scene Two:

Many, many, many generations later, a group of disciples gathered in a small house in Jerusalem. According to Luke's Gospel, this was only a few days after the Passover celebration, and not too long after Jesus had risen, reappeared, ascended, and left them with instructions to wait for something special.

On this particular morning, at nine o'clock to be precise, there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the whole place – the shutters were shaking, and the screen door was slammin', and the biscuits started rolling off the table. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. It was a symphony of language. And God's boys and God's girls found themselves speaking in a thousand tongues, and they hadn't even purchased Babel software, nor did they have access to Google Translator. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, a presence that made them great communicators.

Now remember, I said that all of this was happening in Jerusalem. Jerusalem may have been the center of Jewish life, but God's people had been scattered at Babel. And a diaspora, or a dispersion of good Jewish women and men had been dispersed across the empire. But on this particular day, it being festival season, there were devout Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem from all across the world. And upon hearing this sonic sensation, a crowd gathers, a crowd representing every race, creed, country and language of the world.

And here's the amazing thing. Those disciples who'd suddenly become such gifted communicators, were common Galilean peasants, who most likely spoke Greek and Aramaic, and in broken forms at that. And yet, here they were, proclaiming God's deeds and God's power in every conceivable language, ancient,

current, and even not-yet-invented. And the diverse tapestry of people all heard and understood these words in their own tongues.

The crowd wonders what's happening. Some are amazed. Some just assume it's five o'clock somewhere. But Peter identifies this moment as the special things Jesus said would come.

Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel translates Peter's recitation of Joel's prophecy as follows:

When the time is ripe, says God, I will shed my spirit on all humankind. And your sons and your daughters will speak truthfully. Your young people will come up with starry ideas, and your old people will have radical suggestions. Yes indeed, when the time is ripe, I will shed my spirit on my boys and my girls and they will speak the truth.

Peter is telling the crowd (and you and me too!) that this is the beginning of a new age – an age empowered by the Holy Spirit. Starting today, God's gonna get about the business of restoring the world to its intended purpose. The time is ripe for the church to begin its harvest.

A few chapters later in Acts, we learn that the events of Pentecost inspired an idyllic early community – a place where the whole group of *those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them.*

For a fleeting moment, the church was as God intended it to be.

Scene Three:

First, we heard about a city, great and mighty, that wanted to be insulated and assimilated. But it got scattered, because God's people are not meant to be separated and walled off. Not from each other. And not from God. God's people are meant to be unique, not cloned.

Then, we heard about another city, once great and mighty, but reduced to rubble, captivity, and assimilation by conquerors from Babylon to Rome. It was a city that still managed to hold Passover gatherings to remember the God who'd shepherded it. And in this fallen city, a group of scattered people gathered together in one purpose. And there they heard the sound of God, and they felt the wind of God blow across their faces, and they felt the flame and spark of a Holy Spirit empowering them.

These are ancient stories. But I think they are replicated in every generation.

There are towers of Babel and spirit-filled-homes everywhere we look. And I think the challenge for us as church people is to determine how we avoid the lure of the tower in order to pursue the love of the spirit-filled home.

I think towers inhibit us in two ways. On the one hand, they can appeal to our vanity. It feels good to be special, elite, separate, chosen, privileged. And on the other hand, towers can also overwhelm us. These towers get SO high and SO fortified that their dominance is inevitable. And we feel helpless in avoiding the shadows they cast.

Maybe a forty-foot wall on our Southern border makes you feel safe, and proud, and special. Or maybe it overwhelms you? How can we possibly help all of the legal asylum seekers such a wall displaces?

Maybe that gated community near the light rail makes you feel important, and hip, and trend-setting. This is, after all, a transitional neighborhood, and we can't be too careful. Or maybe all of this development at the expense of affordable housing has you believing that only the mighty dollar has voice. After all, what could be more important to our well-being than property values?

Or maybe it's that tower of Patriarchy – well I guess it's a cloak – but maybe it's appealing. Because privilege has its advantages: higher pay, more autonomy over one's body, freedom from the draining list of subtle abuses that go unnoticed. But that tower can also be overwhelming. How many cracks must we put in the same glass ceiling?

Friends there are towers being built in our city every day. And the powerful are doing their best to wall themselves in.

But there are also spirit-filled houses. And the people in those houses are using the Holy Spirit to become communicators every bit as adept and skilled as those original Galilean disciples.

Did you know the Greyhound bus station has become a spirit-filled house? One where people scattered about our city come and gather to help migrants travelling from Texas. Filled with the Holy Spirit, many of them don't speak Spanish, nor do they know the indigenous tongues of Central America. But they do know a language of empathy. They offer food, and hugs, and welcome. And there's more power in that than in any tower.

Did you know there's a small lot on Wadsworth off of N. Tryon, right next to the Auto Bell? It's close to the rail. It's also adjacent to a property with lots of potential, the kind that would make for really nice lofts. For almost thirty years, this little lot has housed a place called Hope Chapel. Sometimes homeless neighbors gather to get free lunch on Thursdays. And each Sunday morning, a few dozen folks, scattered by the winds of adversity, gather to talk about how this spirit-filled house has helped them overcome addiction, and other struggles, and has given them a sense of community. There is a language of love that transcends space and time. And there's more power in that than in any tower.

And did you know there are living rooms, and Sunday School rooms, and coffee tables, and waiting rooms, and even lines outside of clinics, where people demand the equal treatment of all neighbors: in the dignity they are afforded, in the wages they are paid, in the autonomy they are given in their daily lives. These folks are scattered across our city, but they are gathered in spirit. And they speak, sometimes in public forums, sometimes in private forums, sometimes to peers, sometimes to strangers, sometimes in cyber-space. They speak, even when it's uncomfortable. It's called the language of truth. And there's more power in it than in any tower.

What I'm trying to say is this. Don't let the grandeur of today's marvelous text make you assume that there is not fire in our voices, nor flames in our hearts, nor strength in our spirits. Small groups, acknowledging the diverse gifts, talents, and tongues of their unique members, and acting in one accord, have the power to bring about God's world.

70 apostles, or maybe a few more if the writers weren't counting women, attuned themselves to the Holy Spirit. And a whole city took notice. And a church was born.

Supplies and empathy for four-busloads of migrants a day are sending fissures through a 20 billion dollar wall. 36 hallelujahs, and a rousing chorus of Amazing Grace each Sunday morning, give more value to a small parcel of land on Wadsworth than a tax assessment ever will. And one simple hashtag named MeToo has the ability to send patriarchy to its knees.

The scene we celebrate today is not the earth-quaking of the Spirit, nor the miracle of a thousand tongues. What we celebrate today is the acknowledgement that God works through scattered-people. And when scattered people gather, towers crumble and houses become filled with God's spirit, and the earth quakes, sometimes literally, and sometimes figuratively.

Sardis Baptist Church, this is the day of Pentecost. And we are gathered. And this gathering has the potential to bring God's justice to our city, and to the world. You are God's people, and God's spirit has been poured out on you so that you might speak truth. Today, is the chance to speak truth, in our language, in our actions, in our love, with our spirits, together, as a gathered community of scattered people.

May it be so. And may it begin today.