

# *Listen to the Spirit*

**Acts 2:1-21 Romans 8:14-17**

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church  
May 27, 2007**

In her autobiography, silent film star Colleen Moore tells a story about the confusion of languages. "The mayor of Zurich had arranged a dinner in my honor," she writes. "We'd no sooner sat down than the mayor signaled the orchestra who started playing 'My Country 'Tis of Thee.' We all stood up. When we sat down, I said to the mayor, 'That was the English national anthem.' I should have kept my mouth shut. The mayor sent for the orchestra leader, spoke a few words to him in German, and the orchestra struck up again with 'The Stars and Stripes Forever.'" We all stood up and when the orchestra finished the mayor asked me why I was laughing. Like an idiot I said that wasn't our national anthem, that was a march. The mayor, red in the face, sent for the orchestra leader and spluttered in German at him. The leader asked me the name of our national anthem. I said, 'The Star Spangled Banner.' A few moments later the orchestra struck up again with 'Yes, We Have No Bananas,' the mayor stood up, guests stood at attention once again. When we sat down, I smiled at the mayor and said, 'That was lovely.'" [*Silent Star* by Colleen Moore, 1968]

Our inability to communicate is funny, and often tragic. The ancient story of the Tower of Babel continues to reflect our present reality. The confusion of Babel is not simply our inability to learn foreign languages; the confusion of Babel is the failure of human beings to understand one another. The sin of the Tower of Babel was pride, self-centeredness. "We will build ourselves a tower into heaven. We will show God how great we are. We will show ourselves to be God's equal." The ultimate consequence of our pride is the inability to communicate. We can't hear one another, because we are so wrapped up in ourselves that we don't really care to listen to one another.

The day of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came, is the New Testament's answer to the Tower of Babel. It symbolizes for us the bridging of this gap of understanding. People hear one another with understanding. This is not the result of the invention of some ingenious form of speech which all can understand. It is the gift of the Spirit of God, the Spirit that speaks not with words, but witnesses directly to our own spirit.

Today we are celebrating Pentecost, the pouring out of God's Spirit, the day it dawned upon the Disciples what it all meant, the birth of the Christian community. We hear it described in scripture, and we sing about it in hymns. But behind the words is a reality, an event akin to events in our own lives. God's Spirit speaks to each of us just as it did on that ancient day of Pentecost. When we listen to the Spirit, the barriers fall down.

I came across a story that had no citation, and one cannot be sure if it is historical or legendary. But it's one of those stories that, when you hear it, you know the truth of it. European settlers in America clashed with the Native American tribes. One tragic episode had to do with European children being taken and raised as Indians. On an occasion when

some kind of peace had been made, children were returned to a particular community of settlers. But many of the children, having been taken very young and raised by the Native Americans, had little memory of their real parents. Parents who had lost children were called together, but many of them could not recognize their child after so many years. As a last resort, one mother began to sing the lullaby she had used to put her child to sleep years before, and one child broke from the group and ran to his mother.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "When we cry, "Abba! Father!" It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Listen to the Spirit. The Spirit is singing a song that we know in the depths of our being.

As I grew up in the church I heard people talking about God's unconditional love, the free gift of grace. That became real for me when I experienced it in a group. My "Aha!" experience was the realization that people cared about me, regardless of how I "performed." And then it just made sense that that was what God was all about. These words I had heard: grace, trust, salvation, love great enough to bear the cross for my sake; these words were symbols for a real event. God's spirit was speaking to my spirit. Aha! ***This*** is what the words mean! This longing inside me, this sense of unrest, the incompleteness at the depth of my being is the longing for God, and at the same time, also at the depth of my being there is the assurance that God is there, that there is a center to this life that I can trust, that sustains me, that affirms me. ***This is grace***. The word of Grace becomes real through the experience of grace. The Spirit speaks to us, not with words, but directly. God's spirit witnesses to our spirit. This is the miracle of Pentecost.

It was through the experience of meeting people very different from me that I found out how much they were like me. The experience of working for the summer in a factory with people my age and older, of different races and cultures, for whom this was not just a summer job - the weeks traveling in South America, staying in the homes of Methodists in Mexico City and in Chile - these were the times I most clearly realized that through all the cultural trappings that separated me from others, on the other side of it all was a soul like mine, an insecurity like mine, doubt like mine, laughter welling-up from the same source, the same capacity for creativity, and the same sensitivity to pain. And I was often struck by the realization that this person in Chile, or China, or Santa Ana, or Long Beach, this person with the same sensitivity to pain that I have, has in fact been subjected to much more pain than I have. Through such experiences the words of the Gospel take on a more direct meaning. This is what ministry and mission is about.

Such experiences are testimonies to human unity. I cannot separate myself from another's pain. God's Spirit witnesses to my spirit once again. The same Spirit that gives me the assurance of love from the source of love, is calling me forth to be involved in the lives of others, to share burdens and joys, to be in ministry.

God's Spirit would speak to us and reconnect us. But our world seems deaf to the Spirit, and the reality of Babel continues on.

On this Memorial Day weekend it is appropriate to consider the disconnect many soldiers experience when they come home. Krista Tippet conducted a remarkable interview with Major John Morris for her radio program,<sup>1</sup> "Speaking of Faith." Major Morris is a United Methodist Chaplain who has served two tours of duty in Iraq. He cares for the souls of men and women living through the realities of war, and he has a particular passion for helping them heal when they come home again. He points the

disconnect so many soldiers feel by reading from a journal written by a World War II Veteran, his wife's great uncle.

"Great guy. He served 152 days in combat with the 91st Infantry Division, fought up the boot of Italy 'til the last day in hostilities with the Germans in Italy. This gentleman writes: 'Combat is a traumatic experience. After all these years, even though my senses are not as keen, I can still close my eyes and see and hear and smell the battle and sense the death and fear that surrounded me. My discharge from the Army was anti-climactic. I was 20 years old, but in some ways, I was an old man. I had been in places and seen things that few people see in a lifetime. I wanted to forget, but I couldn't. I had trouble sleeping. I was nervous, confused and angry. I had trouble concentrating, and I had no idea on what to do to earn a living. In today's world, I supposed I'd be diagnosed as having PTSD. However, we were told to go home, forget about it, get a job. My parents encouraged me to attend college. But with my mental state at the time, I knew it wouldn't work. During the next three years, you might say I was a bum. I drove a flower delivery truck, dismantled machinery, worked nights in a 24-hour truck stop, was a molder in a foundry, and went broke operating a restaurant.'

Now that is a World War II, greatest generation, dogface soldier ... he was like his peers of the day." Major Morris continues, "They didn't have a language to discuss it. So many people had experienced it that they silently bore the agony... Since 9/11, the biggest upsurge in customers [at the VA] is World War II-generation veterans... They're coming and looking for help."

Major Morris also talks about his own struggles as a United Methodist Chaplain on the battle field, trying to keep his faith in extreme circumstances:

"Let's talk about love your enemies. That's sorely tested in combat. I think, in a very chilling way, I came to the abyss of hate in Fallujah. The [death of American soldiers] brought me to a point where I could truly sense myself going down a vortex of hate... That was a chilling, chilling moment for me because I knew I was entering a new territory. And once you cross this line, there's no coming back.

When do I become like them? I found myself fueled with a sense of hatred that I could easily have said, you know, 'Hey, I'm God's wrath. We are God's wrath. This needs to be taken care of.' The only thing that pulled me back from that was the power of the Holy Spirit, all the Christian disciplines, and my sense of understanding that, wait a minute, as much as I abhor everything that's done, and as much as I believe what was done was evil ... I knew I could not cross that line and say, "OK, God's on my side, and here we go." No, this is chaos, this is human fallenness to the max, and we're using the most brutal tool of human society, the military, to solve a very, very terrible problem. And this isn't God here, this is fallen human beings. So God help me and have mercy on me. I'm a part of something like this, and I prayed that it wouldn't be, but here we are. Save me from becoming a debased, immoral human being. And save my soldiers as well."

What can save any of us, other than God's Spirit witnessing to our spirit that we are all children of God. This is the Spirit that overcomes the alienation of Babel's tower, that will reconnect us with our brothers and sisters returning home from combat, and that will finally reconcile us even with those we call enemies. O Lord, help us.

---

<sup>i</sup> *Speaking of Faith* archives, see:

<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/soulofwar/index.shtml>