

“Babel No More”  
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I was reading a PBS story the other day about Pentecost. I thought it was kind of neat that they at least addressed it. It was a woman writing it. She said, “I had to call my uncle who was a Presbyterian minister to find out about Pentecost.”

She said, “Why is it so difficult for me to remember from Confirmation what was going on in Pentecost?”

He said, “Well, it is difficult. We have three major holidays: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.” And, he said that in his own life he would put Easter as a 10, Christmas as an 8 and Pentecost as a 6.

“But,” he continued, “In my congregation, I would be willing to bet that most people put Easter as maybe a 9 or 10, Christmas maybe an 8, and Pentecost as a 3.”

I thought that was probably pretty correct, and I got to thinking, “why is that?” I would be willing to bet that based on Church attendance that Christmas is a 10, Easter is a 7 or 8 and Pentecost 1 or 2.

I’m thinking maybe what we need to do is spruce up Pentecost. Then I realized that Christmas has Santa Claus, Easter has the Easter Bunny, but what are we going to do about Pentecost? And then I thought, “I have the answer! The ‘Flash.’ He is already wearing red.”

Christmas is really hard to figure out how Santa Claus gets all of those presents to all of those kids all over the world in one night. We have seen movies made about it; we have all of these ideas about it, but still it makes me scratch my head.

We won’t even get into how slow the Easter Bunny is hopping, and really, does the Easter Bunny even have arms to carry all of those baskets?

But the Flash. Oh, my gosh. It is like here’s Des Moines, here’s the Quad cities, and the United States is done. The Flash is so quick that the whole world could be done in an hour and a half!

Pentecost needs to have the Flash, just like Easter has the Easter Bunny, and Christmas has Santa Claus, and you have presents. So I’m going to start a campaign. We are going to raise money to hire the Flash for Pentecost next year, and I’ll bet we will have three times as many people, and everybody will dress up, and it will be great. So, just wait.

I tried to figure out why Pentecost has always been on the back burner and I had to go back in history and look at why that is such a problem.

We go back to the Reformation. At the Reformation, Martin Luther and then Ulrich Zwingli - and I can name off other people who formed the Reformation - did that in opposition to the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church at that time. They were very interested in putting together doctrine that would separate themselves from the Roman Catholic Church and how they could define themselves as pure and holy.

It was about writing it down, living it this way and saying who you were against. So they didn’t have a lot of room and the Holy Spirit opened it up. They were trying to write it down, live it and get it organized. The Holy Spirit would just change things so we don’t want to have a whole lot of the Spirit moving. On the other side you had the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church, and then you also had the problem with the Anabaptists - they were all over the place with

movement. They were everyone from the Baptist movement to the Holiness movement to the Pentecostals (and they had more movement of the Spirit than any good Presbyterian would ever want to experience)!

So they, 500 hundred years ago, tried to tone down those Anabaptists, which also meant the bulk of the problem was trying very hard to say, “Down, Spirit, down. We have enough going on trying to organize ourselves, write our doctrine and make everything decent and in order.” And so we didn’t really want that Holy Spirit getting in the way.

Over and over again the Holy Spirit got in the way. It got in the way 2000 years ago when the Jewish people and the Roman authorities put down this horrible Christian sect, or this sect of Judaism, that later became Christianity. They had it licked. They killed the leader and hung him on a cross. Even when he was resurrected, or that stone was rolled away, and they either stole the body or whatever they claimed was the Resurrection, they were taken care of. But all of a sudden, a whole group of them gathered for a feast and the Spirit came upon them.

The Resurrection did form the Church. Pentecost and the movement of the Holy Spirit at the time that all was lost brought everyone together and gave them hope. Men and women who had scattered and given up were now willing to stand up to the Jewish community of power at that time. They were willing to stand up for the Roman authority to be martyred, to die; no longer running away, but facing what they had to face to endure and to allow the Church to grow - amazing transformation.

We, in the Presbyterian Church, don’t handle Spirit very well. I was reading what someone else said: The Presbyterians - with the Holy Spirit - are kind of like having people having a cell phone and only knowing how to call on it. I know I’m going to get into trouble for saying this, but the actual quote was, “It’s like an old person with a smart phone.” [Laughter] They only know how to call on it, but they miss out on texting. They miss out on using Facebook on their phone, and miss out on using all of these different things you can do. You can look up stuff. There isn’t a baseball game or football game that I go to that I’m not looking up somebody. Or [at the] movies, I’m looking up to see what other movie that actress was in, and I can find out that fast [snaps fingers]. There are so many uses for a smart phone. But, unless you know how to use it and play with it every day, you are not getting the most out of it.

But our Anabaptist brothers and sisters would say, “You Presbyterians have problems. You are only making phone calls on your smart phone of faith. You aren’t getting the most out of your Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has so much available to us, but you want to control it and it is not controllable. You want to write it in a creed and leave it there where it is safe, and the Holy Spirit isn’t going to be safe. You had better be careful praying, because one of these days God might actually speak to you through the Holy Spirit, and then you are going to be in big trouble. You’re going to be doing this [throwing your hands in the air], and you don’t want to be doing that. Because your spouse will take you to the doctor’s office. Yet, the whole time the Spirit is working through us in unique and different ways.”

The wonderful aspect of what happened that day in Pentecost was it changed the paradigm of what the faith means. When you look back through the Jewish faith - of which Jesus was one and we all come out of the Jewish faith. So when I say anything that is perceived as derogatory, I’m speaking as if we were all that. They were struggling at that time, 2000 years ago, to try to live up to being righteous enough, to follow all of the 613 Levitical Codes properly. They were so honored, and yet they felt like they’d never done enough.

Now go 1500 years into the future, to the Reaffirmation, and what the Roman Catholic Church was doing, and of which we were all a part of at that time. They were trying to live up to - be good enough - and yet they always felt, especially Martin Luther, that he could never go to confession

enough, because the minute he stepped out of the confessional box, he would think something wrong and have to go right back in.

The Priest used to beg Martin Luther to go away. They didn't want to hear his frightful sins all day long. Yet Martin Luther was so scared because if he died and had that one lingering sin floating out there, that he hadn't been absolved of, he was going to hell. He couldn't buy the fact that you could pay your way out with indulgences or anything else. It was a very frightening religion.

The truth of Christianity, the truth of what happened at Pentecost, is very different. What happened that day: He had the Apostles there. You had almost 3000 other people who had gathered around. Disciples, not the real Holy people - just anybody. They were filled. They felt that movement. They didn't have to be forgiven first. They didn't have to be restored first. They were not all perfect people, but they were all filled and speaking in different tongues. It wasn't speaking in different ways with a purpose, like the Apostle Paul had to do later; but what they were doing was very specific. They all spoke in different languages and that had a purpose.

The other paradigm shift that happened with the birth of Christianity: Before that, Jewish people did not evangelize. You were born into your faith, and you were the chosen ones. Everything was exclusive. You were born into [the Jewish faith] or you were not a part of [it]. You were appropriate in the way you lived or you were cast out. You were included or you were excluded, that was it.

But now all of a sudden you had a new form of Judaism called "Christianity," where the Holy Spirit came down and said, "Each one of you will speak in a different language, in all of these different places. You will hear your own language being proclaimed."

It was profound because now everyone was included - even the heretic - the ones who were not of the proper birthright. You didn't have to have a birthright in Judaism, all were acceptable.

The second part of that, which was totally shocking to that day and age, [was that] now the paradigm had changed so that now you didn't sit back and try to please God with your perfection. Your path in this new religion was to go out and proclaim the Gospel, to be witnesses to this Jesus the Christ and bring people to the faith. That's why you had the language barrier. It wasn't so everyone could see you were special, "look at me, look at me. I'm filled with the Spirit." It was to bring people to Jesus Christ. It was the Holy Spirit who filled you and enabled you to be that witness.

Now we Presbyterians have our problems with that. That is what we pay clergy for. We are called. Our vision, if you expect Ken and I and the other staff to prepare you - and we have done that [for] better or worse, and we are continuing to do it - a call to witness is for each one of us. We do it by simply living our lives. Talking about our faith and sharing it with others. That is very hard to do, but it can happen in a very special way.

There are those faith moments - the Celtic community talks about "thin" places. I have mentioned this before. There are places where Heaven and earth are very close together, and there are "thin" places where it is easier to feel the Spirit - feel Heaven in your midst. Those moments happen in the most surprising ways. It could be at a death. [A family member says,] "I didn't know if dad would ever be able to survive mom's passing. But he didn't lose his faith and look at how he is talking and still living his life, with hope and trust." That was a "thin" place - a painful place - but it's still a place where children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren watch how the Holy Spirit filled him and gave him strength and hope, and he witnessed his faith to his family.

It might be another moment where you would be out serving at a soup kitchen and you are just giving out food. (We go once a month to the shelter and we feed people.) All of a sudden there will be this moment when someone talks about their faith and you chime in with something back. That is

a “thin” place. It is a moment when Heaven and earth collided and [you] feel the Holy Spirit in your midst. That’s a moment which we are going to talk about it. You go home that evening and say to your family, “let me tell you about what happened,” and you share it. Then, all of a sudden, everyone else around you realizes that God still moves in our midst. We are still engaged with the divine.

You can come up with your own ideas, but our goal at Pentecost is to share and witness to the glory of God. Our task is to look for the moment where it feels like a “thin” place. When you feel it, you will know it, and it’s your job to look around and say, “What am I going to learn from that? Who would I talk to, or where can I make a difference right now because I am feeling it? Somebody needs me. Somebody just wants me to listen and usually in an emotional place.”

You are hurting. You are happy. Something amazing is going on - could be a wedding, and could be a baptism, or any number of things. The key is: Are you in tune with God? It takes prayer to do that. Are you in tune when you get to that narrow “thin” place where you feel Heaven and earth colliding?

You look around and know that God is trying to speak to you. The Holy Spirit is trying to move you. Look around. Who is the one in need? Where can I be most present? And then you share your heart with them.

I have seen people who are desperately lonely, and felt those moments, and have the courage to walk over to them. You can just feel it, you feel convicted to do it and sit down with them - and pretty soon they are talking and sharing and there might even be a tear. You just let them go. You are Christ, in that moment, to them. All you may need to say is, “Before we leave, may I say a simple prayer?” and this has changed your relationship with that person, and the way they look at the world. It is a Pentecost moment.

Pray to God to help you find the “thin” places to make a true difference, to be mindful of who the people are in that moment, because when you respond and you feel that you have made a difference, it isn’t just the person you spent time with who is free - you feel it too. The Church grows, in faith, hope and love, through our actions of being prepared to respond. Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen.