

## Spirit Words

A Swiss man, looking for directions, pulls up at a bus stop where two Americans are waiting.

“Entschuldigung, koennen Sie Deutsch sprechen?” he asks. The two Americans just stare at him.

“Excusez-moi, parlez vous Francais?” he tries. The two continue to stare.

“Parlare Italiano?” No response.

“Hablan ustedes Espanol?” Still nothing.

The Swiss guy drives off, extremely disgusted. The first American turns to the second and says, “Y’know, maybe we should learn a foreign language.”

“Why?” says the other. “That guy knew *four* languages, and it didn't do *him* any good.”

You know, this week I’m going to leave the friendly confines of Fairfield County and spend a few days in Greenville. I’m pretty sure they speak English there.

But how many of you have ever journeyed outside the United States to a place in which most people speak a language

other than English? If you have, even as you traveled and reveled in the beauty of the countryside and took in the sights of the cities, did you feel like a stranger in a strange land? Were the native people's appearance and dress, their ways and customs, different from yours? If so, you may have gotten used to those differences within a relatively short time.

But I suspect that what *really* made you feel like an outsider in that unfamiliar place was the language. The citizens of that country didn't speak your language, and you didn't understand theirs. In your ears, their language sounded like incomprehensible gibberish. Language constituted a barrier between you and them.

A while back, someone shared his experience of visiting such a place, where a different language was spoken everywhere he went. Then one day, walking through the city, he encountered a small group of people speaking English. Years afterward, he still remembered the wonderful and welcome sound of his own language. He confided, "It was like music to my ears."

Now you and I are native speakers of English. We've heard it all our lives. We're so accustomed to its countless irregularities that we don't even *think* of them as irregularities. Or about the

fact that English is an extremely difficult language to learn, if it's not one's first language.

But human creatures around the globe speak hundreds of different languages. And the Bible offers an explanation of this phenomenon in the ancient story of the Tower of Bābel. At that time, people were scattered across the face of the earth. They began to speak many diverse languages and became completely unable to understand one another.

Much later, on the day of Pentecost described in the Acts of the Apostles, fifty days have passed since the Passover. People from “every nation under heaven” have come to Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. The harvest festival. As you heard a moment ago, Luke, the author of Acts, lists for us the many homelands of these Pentecost pilgrims.

Because, after the Babylonian exile, Jews had been dispersed all over the known world. And language barriers divided them. Yet, for this special day, they've journeyed to the holy city.

And also gathered in Jerusalem are a hundred twenty of Jesus' followers, “all together in one place.”

That's when it happens. These believers hear the sound of a mighty wind coming down, whooshing and roaring through the

house. Above one another's heads, they see what look like flames of fire. And then these Galileans—not known for their linguistic abilities—begin speaking fluently in the native languages of every person in that festival throng.

For on this day of Pentecost, God's Spirit descends with awesome power. Descends in wind and flame, both signs of divine presence. The Spirit empowers a group of Jesus' first disciples to speak in languages they have never studied. Luke wants to be sure we understand: These disciples of Jesus are not speaking in tongues. They're speaking actual, intelligible languages. Languages made up of words. As the words of this first Christian community are heard by people from all over the world, the church receives its birth.

The amazing, dynamic power of the Holy Spirit works this miracle of Pentecost. And still today, the Spirit descends with great power on the church. The Spirit empowers us to speak. The Spirit gives us words.

The first Spirit-words we receive are the words of sacred Scripture. All Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspires the Word not only when it's written, but also when it's

read and interpreted. The Spirit inspires every word that's preached. And the Spirit inspires the preacher.

Beginning with our Pentecost preacher. Peter. Now you remember all the pre-Easter stories of Simon Peter. The gospels portray him as a simple fisherman. A rash, impetuous kind of person who, when he opens his mouth, often inserts his foot. Fear motivates him to deny even knowing his Lord. But that's before the death and resurrection of Jesus. And that's before Peter receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's before Peter is *filled* with the Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, it's a new Peter who stands up to preach. Who speaks boldly. Courageously. Clearly. Eloquently. This is the Peter, this is the rock on whom the church is built. This is a changed Peter. This is a radically transformed Peter. This is a Peter who has received Spirit-words.

You and I receive Spirit-words, too. The Spirit nudges. The Spirit prompts. Every word of kindness you speak, every word of comfort you offer, the Spirit is in it. Every word of grace that comes from your lips is shot through with the Holy Spirit.

And what about those challenging situations in which you have to tell someone something that he or she needs to hear? You

may have no choice. But you don't want to do it. It's not easy. You're afraid it will be hurtful. And you don't quite know how to say it. My sisters and brothers, every time you speak the truth in love, the Spirit of truth is there. Providing the words.

The Holy Spirit reminds you of every word Jesus has said. And causes these words to surface in your memory just when you need them most. When you're stressed. When you're anxious. When you're tempted. When you're fearful. When you're despairing. When you're grieving. That's when the Holy Spirit enables you to remember the words you need. The words of Christ. Words of wisdom. Words of counsel. Words of healing. Words of strength. Words of hope. Words of peace. Words of forgiveness. Words of love. Spirit-words.

The Spirit gives you the words that you're to say when you witness to your abiding faith in Jesus Christ. Even if you're in a setting where you may be mocked. Or rejected. Or even persecuted. Just as Jesus and his first followers were mocked. And rejected. And persecuted. According to Jesus, you don't ever need to worry about what you're going to say. For *at that very hour*, the Advocate will come alongside you. Will be with you. Just as the

Lord assured Moses, *I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak*—so too, the Spirit will be with *your* mouth.

You and I stand in need of the guidance and direction of the Spirit.

Has there ever been a time when the Holy Spirit was needed more desperately than it is today? This is a time of profound polarization. This is a time of deep dissension and discord. We need help. Humankind needs help.

Beloved, there is a Helper who can help us! There is a Helper who *will* help us. The One who descends on the day of Pentecost, on this festival day when we rejoice and celebrate.

For only the Spirit of Christ has power to break down barriers that divide us. Only the Spirit of Christ has power to cross boundaries that separate us. Only the Spirit of Christ—only the Spirit that on Pentecost enables believers to speak in every language of the world—only that Spirit, poured out on *all* flesh, young and old, male and female—only that Spirit has power to reverse the division and the chaos of Bābel. Only the Spirit of Christ has power to bring us together as people united by one language, speaking one language: the language of love.

The Holy Spirit brings us together. And comes to us *when* we're all together. In one place. The Spirit comes to us as *community*, as a community of faith. The Spirit comes to us as church. The Spirit makes bread and wine be for us the body and blood of Christ. The Spirit enlivens our worship. The Spirit animates and vitalizes us as church. We are the church!

And Pentecost gives us, the church, our mission. Our reason for being. Pentecost calls the first-century church and the twenty-first century church to see visions and to dream dreams and to prophesy and to shed abroad the good news! The message of Pentecost is the words believers were speaking. The message of Pentecost is the words believers *are* speaking. Spirit-words that proclaim the great glad tidings of Jesus Christ all the way to the ends of the earth. So that all the peoples of this world may hear of him and call on him.

For our God has made a wondrous promise. Our God has promised that everyone—*everyone*—who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.