

Spirited Speech  
Acts 2:1-21

It's the birthday of the church!

Hey, if you ever want a glimpse into human nature go to a four-year-old's birthday party. When a four-year-old is given a present this is what we as parents would like to happen: the child takes the present and carefully unwraps it, looks at it in surprise and excitement as if it's the best thing in the whole wide world and then politely thanks the giver of the gift.

That's what the parents *hope* will happen . . . but what actually happens is that the four year old snatches the present, rips open the paper, looks at the gift, shrugs and looks around for the next one to open.

Yes, they know what birthdays are about! They know who's the most important person in the world! We live in a society that celebrates the freedom and rights and triumph of the individual. It's all about me . . . me . . . me!

So, as we celebrate today I want no snatching and no tantrums . . . this is a birthday with a difference. It's different because it's not a celebration of *me* the individual . . . today is a celebration of 'we' . . . of us. We celebrate that we are the church. Together. We are the church because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. We share a common . . . a *corporate* faith.

Sometimes I hear people say: 'My faith is personal' . . . and what they mean by that is: "I don't want to talk about it"!

Yes, it's true, I have a personal relationship with God . . . each of you have a personal relationship with God . . . no one else can believe for us . . . but, that doesn't mean I hold my faith so close to my chest no one else gets to see it. Faith *is* personal, but that's only half the story. Faith is also corporate . . . we can't separate the personal relationship we have with Jesus from the gathering of people we call 'church'. To have a personal relationship with Jesus means belonging to the holy, Christian church, as we confess in the creed.

Jesus' original twelve disciples had an intimate relationship with Jesus, but on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on them in a special way . . . in a way Jesus had promised would happen . . . in a way that would make them 'church'. Not church as in a building . . . or as in a denomination . . . but church in that they were the first called people of the new covenant . . . called to be Jesus' witnesses to the end of the earth. And, that's what being church means . . . it means being Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth. Our personal faiths are joined together by the Holy Spirit so that our personal witness might be a public, communal witness as well.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost he gave those first disciples the ability to speak . . . but, not just to speak any old words . . . not to speak about the footy . . . or about where they went on holidays . . . to speak about what God had done through his Son Jesus . . . to make publicly their personal faith.

For nearly two thousand years now the church has been doing just that, for that is the church's main task . . . that is the church's commission . . . that is your commission as members of the church. There are a lot of other things the church does – a lot of important things: charity work, social justice work, education work, community building work. These are all important and helpful acts . . . but if the church doesn't speak about Jesus then we may as well join the Lion's Club! It's the speaking . . . that's what sets us apart from other organizations . . . that's what we are called to do. Speak . . . proclaim . . . witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And, that can be the hardest thing to do, can't it? For most of us it doesn't come naturally. It's like learning a new language . . . the language of faith. Like any language it takes time and practice to learn. So, we start with Sunday School and family devotions and Bible study groups and Confirmation instruction . . . and for some it stops there . . . and it remains a head language not a heart language . . . to be a heart language we have to keep on listening and learning and speaking our whole life. We want the language of faith to be a heart language not for our own sake . . . it's not an end in itself . . . we learn it by heart so we can translate it . . . so we can speak it in ways that connect with others . . . for others outside the church . . . those who don't understand the churchy jargon and short hand . . . those for whom the language of faith is foreign . . . they need to hear the gospel in a way that is familiar so the Spirit can create faith in them too.

You see, if I was to say to you . . .

*. . . Gott liebte die Menschen so sehr, dass er seinen einzigen Sohn hergab. Nun wird jeder, der sein Vertrauen auf den Sohn Gottes setzt, nicht zugrunde gehen, sondern ewig leben. (John 3:16)*

Isn't that a wonderful gospel message . . . if you speak German! If you don't you would have just heard words and not THE Word! You didn't hear, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .".

But, it's not just speaking in a foreign language that can make it difficult. Sometimes we can speak English and people still not understand . . . listen to this quote I found in a book from my seminary days . . .

*. . . If it is assumed that God is absolutely simple and unconditioned, his relationship to time, and to historical particularity above all, becomes essentially problematic. God's so far transcendent activity cannot be described as his acting in history, as this absolute initiative of God could not be at the same time immanent in our history without losing its transcendence. Why not, we may ask? Does it not depend on what we mean by transcendence, which can itself be construed dualistically or non-dualistically? Why should not the unconditioned become conditioned without loss of its transcendent reality?*

Get it? You, of course, heard that God is for you not against you, didn't you!?

You see, the way we speak about God matters. Speaking the language of faith amongst ourselves is a good start, but we also need to be able to speak that language in ways those outside the church can understand. And, it works best if faith is our heart language.

The miracle of the Pentecost described in Acts is that the Spirit enabled the disciples to do that. But, notice, it's not magic. Simply speaking in different languages didn't *automatically* produce faith . . . some scoffed at what the disciples were saying . . . some thought they were drunk! It's not magic. But, by speaking in the language of the people a barrier to faith was knocked down. People's ears pricked up. They listened. And three thousand were baptized that day!

We, as a church have the task of speaking the language of faith into a world which doesn't know Jesus and often doesn't want to know Jesus. That's not a simple task, but it's not an impossible task. We have the Holy Spirit to guide us. We have each other to encourage us. We have our baptism to remind us that we live under God's grace and forgiveness so we shouldn't despair of the times when we don't speak as we ought. We have our whole lives to practice communicating the language of faith. For, we really do have something to say. Something worth hearing. When we are part of the church – gathered together by the Spirit – our private confession of faith goes public. Pentecost is our reminder of that: we exist not for ourselves and for our personal relationship with Jesus, we exist as the church to proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

May it always be so . . . as a gift to the world . . . Happy Birthday church.

Amen.

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Pentecost, 2025