

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
May 23, 2010
Contemporary Parable: "Universal Translators"
John 14:15-31, Acts 2:1-8, 11b-21

Pentecost is a Jewish holiday. Did you know that? Originally. It was the feast that occurred when the disciples were in Jerusalem. It was historically and symbolically related to the harvest festival of Shavout, a giving of the first fruits to God. In commemoration of God's gift of the ten commandments at Mount Sinai, 50 days after the Exodus.

So here we are 50 days following the resurrection of Jesus. Ten days ago, according to tradition, Jesus left the disciples, ascending into heaven right in front of them. A long, lonely ten days. And then today, suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Acts 2:41 reports the noise and activity attracted a huge crowd and Peter preached a sermon where 3000 believed his message and were baptized!

So Happy Birthday! This is the birthday of the church- It is what we are celebrating with the art displayed in the sanctuary this month. It is the beginning of Jesus' disciples, of us, taking on the ministry of Jesus as our own.

But what about this story we have of the disciples being filled with the Spirit and speaking in languages they could not possibly have known? What do we do with this story? Is it a reversal of the predicament we got our selves into at the Tower of Babel? Remember that story? We read it in our invitation to worship today. Human beings became so arrogant, God confused their language. Or is this a metaphorical story like the Tower of Babel? A symbolic reversal of the division of humans by the Spirit, reuniting people once again?

Or how about xenoglossy? There's a word for you! Xenoglossy, the phenomenon in which a person can speak language that they could not have learned through natural means? I heard a story about a mother who took her very young twins to the doctor. The twins were babbling to each other and the doctor overheard them. The doctor commented about how nice it was that the mother was bringing them up bilingual. The mother replied that the twins were just doing that strange thing that twins do, speaking in their own special language. The doctor said no, they were speaking Chinese. The strange thing is that the twins had no access to anyone who spoke Chinese.

Is this story true? There is a doctor named Ian Stevenson who has written a book about his study of this phenomenon. Most of the cases occur after trauma or in hypnosis or a trance state. The most obvious explanations is either deliberate fraud or that the person concerned learnt the language in early childhood without

being aware of it. An addition explanation is that it is evidence of either past life memories, or a spiritual connection.

So what was it the disciples did? How did they gain this spiritual gift? They had certainly suffered trauma- seeing Jesus crucified, resurrected and lifted into heaven. They had been fasting and praying since then, which could leave them in an enhanced spiritual state. So the wind of the spirit whips through them, the flames of the spirit fall upon them, the spirit fills them, and they speak the truth the good news so others can understand what they have experienced.

I have to say, I am a little envious. I would love to be able to suddenly stand before you and preach the Gospel in Spanish. Mi amigo y amigas, Dios es bueno! But that would not do most of you any good! You see they were given the gift of tongues for that place and time. And this is an incredible witness that God comes to each and every one of us, in every place and every time, and every language, just as we need to hear.

And God works in marvelous ways and gives the Spirit to all of us as we need it. I and all of you have been given and are given the gifts, the fruits of the Spirit: Paul lists them for us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. given for the common good. wisdom, knowledge, faith healing, prophecy, and speaking and interpreting tongues. But most important, he reminds

us, no matter what gift we have, we must use them in love. The greatest gift of all is love. And on this, the birthday of the church, we are called to take up Jesus' ministry as our own and become universal translators of the greatest gift of all, God's love.