

There's nothing wrong with a bit of spectacle, so long as it supports substance, rather than distracting. [As you can see, hear, and smell this morning. But as much as I love the ways we're elevating our worship, I love even more the glorious work of God that we're celebrating today.]

The supernatural wind and fire is the first thing most people think of when they think of Pentecost, and the second is the miraculous use of different languages, just as people think the tower itself, and the confusion of speech, are the most important things about the Tower of Babel story. But then we're taking after the disciple Philip who was face to face with Jesus when he asked, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." It's not just that he was looking directly at the most perfect self-revelation God could offer. The other irony is that Philip would have heard many times that no one can see the Father and live.

So we should consider the possibility that the true miracle of Pentecost is closer to us, in both space and time, than we expect. The possibility that Pentecost is really about God being in the world in a new way, a way that lets anyone have a substantive and enduring relationship with God, that can only change lives in profound ways. Because the fire and wind and languages are the least miraculous, the least compelling and profound part of the Pentecost experience.

Rather than get distracted, remember what the content of the apostles' speech was: they were speaking about God's deeds of power. That's also a miracle. The same group who, when they had God among them in the person of Jesus, got distracted time and again by their own desires, now that they have God among them in the person of the Holy Spirit, they are finally living in the reality that God is most important, not themselves.

The same fact is also amazing in light of the popular conception of Pentecost as the "birthday of the church." That phrase always struck me as a little glib but if you like it, more power to you. But one good thing about that understanding of Pentecost means that the Pentecost story is the story of the first ever church meeting, and the disciples are not talking about money or programs or money or facilities or money or policy or money or politics, they're talking about God and the awesome deeds that have revealed a bit of the nature of God to the world.

They are also not fighting with each other, and that's a miracle too. The petty squabbles between the disciples prefigured the upheavals and schisms that would later afflict the Church, but in this moment we see that God's will for the Church is unity, harmony, communion. The whole Church with every member in communion with every other, all praising and proclaiming God was heaven on earth. Perhaps the spectacle of Pentecost is not so much the dazzling inauguration of the Church, but a vision of her perfected end, a vision of her unity restored by her creator.

Another miracle is the fact that they are not talking with each other. The whole point of the language thing is to enable the disciples to talk to *other* people, people

*outside* the Church, people who were so different from themselves that it literally took divine intervention to make them talk the same language. So the Spirit transformed them from disciples to apostles. They were still followers of Jesus, but the Spirit burned away their fear, confusion, and self-absorption and purified their discipleship into a solid core that would enable them to lead others to become disciples of the risen Lord. And the crowd, so diverse as to represent the nations and cultures of all the known world, was captivated. They were not offended or put off to hear personal accounts of God's transformational work in the world, they were drawn in. Even the naysayers could only bring themselves to mock the disciples' enthusiasm, not the message itself.

Now we see why God chose to continue *these* miracles of Pentecost into our own day, instead of the sound and light show. Because despite all the setbacks the Church has faced, all the mistakes her very human leaders have made, all the marks of the Holy Spirit's living and active presence are still visibly active in Christian communities to this very day. While St. Luke rattles off a list of 15 countries, today the Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages; far more than any other text. No one can understand them all, but the Holy Spirit can inspire the readers of every one. And of course the Bible is only one static aspect of the life of the Church; at this very moment Christians all around the world are dynamically worshiping and praising God in a multitude of languages. No individual can literally pray without ceasing, but corporately, we do indeed.

And, while we all, like the disciples, have our personal faults and fears, the Spirit will help us overcome them. The Tower of Babel story begins with defiance of God's command to humanity to spread over the whole earth, and ends with God being much more distant from humanity, speaking only to a few chosen people of profound faith until coming to live among us as Jesus. The Pentecost story shows not just the symbolic reversal of the confusion of languages, but also God's people going out into all lands, bringing with them a new way of being intimately close to God, a way that is open to all people. As wonderful and grace-filled as it was that God chose to dwell among humanity in the Tabernacle and then the Temple, greater still that God now dwells in every human heart that will have him.

Just as humanity's defiance, hubris, and arrogance have consequences, so too do God's grace, love, and forgiveness. In an awesome display of humility, God has shifted from choosing people for intimate relationships with God, to allowing all people to choose to have such a relationship with God. And of course we are transformed when we invite the Holy Spirit to abide within us.

So we celebrate that by God's grace, now we too have the power to connect with God, to focus on God, and, critically, to share God, to share our eyewitness accounts of the living God with people outside the Church. When we do, God will be present, facilitating the conversation. We need only to participate faithfully in the life of the Church and open our hearts and minds to the leadings of the Spirit.

A close reading of the Pentecost story reminds us that the life of the Church isn't so much about spectacle as it is about focusing on God, and the story continues in an unbroken line into our own day by sharing the good news that God intervenes in human history, including in our own time, and God's deeds of power are always to the good. In particular, we take our place in this ongoing story by sharing it with people outside the Church, them to share in the love and faithfulness that we enjoy here. Doing this will make their lives better but also ours, too.

Now that we know what it looks like when the Spirit is pouring through the Church and into the world, we can more easily contemplate how she may be leading us as a parish and as individuals. [Yes, enjoy the wonderful music today and every other aspect of our spectacle, which lifts our hearts and minds to God, and therefore is an offering pleasing to God. But also] remember to connect with the Spirit in prayer, today and every day, and be on the lookout for the subtle but spectacular things the Spirit is doing, not only in your own life, but also in other people's lives, and continue celebrating the wondrous works of God.