

Blowin' in the Wind!  
Acts 2:1-21  
John J. Yonker

5-30-04  
First Christian Church  
Columbia, Missouri  
Pentecost Sunday

Willard L. Sperry, formerly professor Old Testament and Dean of the Divinity School of Harvard University, was invited to the Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, commencement exercise one year. While he was standing on the platform watching the long procession draw near he glanced down at the program in his hand, and found to his complete surprise that he was listed as the commencement speaker. When asked later what he did and how he did it, he replied, "I said the usual things that one says on such occasions, and I said them three times."<sup>1</sup>

Now there are some usual things that we always say on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost Sunday is the birthday of the church. This is the day remember that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus' timid disciples gathered together in a room somewhere in Jerusalem and drove them out into the streets of the city, boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Pentecost is the celebration of the coming of the Spirit, and should be the opportunity for us to be filled again with the Holy Spirit, to give us courage and power to boldly witness with our words and deeds to the good news of the gospel.

Those are the usual kinds of things what we usually say on Pentecost Sunday. And there is nothing wrong with them. But I want to say some unusual kinds of things on this Pentecost Sunday. I want us to open up our sails and see where else the spirit can blow us today! Take a look at the text!

All of them were filled with the Holy spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

This is one of the most famous passages in the entire New Testament, read every year on Pentecost Sunday because it tells the story of the birth of the church. It is the favorite text for a significant number of Christians who identify themselves as "Pentecostal", who see in the outpouring of the spirit on Pentecost the promise of being filled with the Holy Spirit, which gives them the ability to speak in unknown tongues, different than any regular language, which is a sort of spirit language, and which is unintelligible to all except one who is gifted by the spirit to interpret.

But what we find happening here in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost is something quite different. Here is the coming of the spirit which gives the followers of Jesus the ability to speak in languages of the world so that people from every corner of the known world can understand what they are saying. As the story says, when "they began to speak, all the

people who had come from every corner of the known world were amazed and astonished, and ask one another,

Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each one of us, in our own native languages? Parthians, Medes, Elamites . . . ?

Here is the meaning of Pentecost, here is the real power and purpose of the outpouring of the spirit, the gift of intelligible speech, the ability to speak and hear and understand, the miracle of communication.

Here is the gift of God for all the people of God, the gift of communication.

And what a gift it is! Just ask the woman lying in the intensive care unit with the ventilator stuck in her throat! Just ask the man who has suffered the loss of hearing, and now has to ask you to keep asking, "What did you say?" What a great gift it is to speak and to hear and to understand.

What a great gift it is! But a gift that we often refuse. Remember "The Music Man", that wonderful musical about the man who rides into the small Iowa town and tries to con the folks into buying musical instruments with the promise that he can teach all their children how to play. When he hits town he discovers a people who are described in the song they sing, "Iowa Stubborn";

Oh, there's nothing halfway, About the Iowa way to treat you,  
When we treat you, Which we may not do at all!  
There's an Iowa kind, A kind-a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude,  
We've never been without that we recall!

We can be cold as the falling  
Thermometer in December if you ask about our weather in July.  
And we're so by-gone stubborn, we can  
Stand touching noses for a week at a time, And never see eye-to-eye.

We can stand touching noses for a week at a time and never see eye-to-eye. Isn't that the way it goes? Let someone propose a new idea and someone says, "We've never done it that way here before. What's wrong with you?" Or someone discovers a verse of scripture and starts telling everyone how important it is, and what it means, and what we should start doing, and someone will say, "That's not what the Bible means?" And before too long they are standing nose to nose, talk and talking, and never seeing eye-to-eye.

In the 1870's and 80's such a controversy raged in the Christian Church regarding the use of organs in worship. It broke out in open conflict in the Christian Church of

Springfield, Missouri, and its news was picked up and reported by a newspaper in St. Louis, dated January 31, 1887.

For several weeks a warm and at times acrimonious warfare has been waged in the Christian Church, of this City, between those who oppose the musical instruments in public worship and those who favored the organ. Yesterday affairs were brought to a crisis, and there were some sensational scenes. After the pastor, E.G. Laughlin, had read the opening hymn, the organist began playing and many joined in the singing, but at the same time the opponents of the organ started up another tune, and a pandemonium ensued. When the sacrament was announced, Brother Rogers arose and said he preferred not to partake with the organ people. After the sacrament, an anti-organ brother arose to smoothe matters over with a talk, but was interrupted with a lively hymn volunteered by the organ crowd. At the close of the services, Mr. Bills, having consulted a lawyer, was advised to play the organ at all hazards, and he did so, and the meeting broke up in confusion.<sup>2</sup>

In 1890 when Joseph H. Foy, the minister of this church, asked the congregation to vote on the use of instrumental music in worship, some people opposed it. One man even left and affiliated with the Presbyterians, who then were worshiping without the organ. He said it was better to be a Presbyterian without an organ than to a Disciple with an organ. Well, I don't know how much better it really was, because some time later he changed his mind and came back to good old First Christian. The organ was first used for worship during the evening services, September 14, 1890, and reporter noted a month later that singing in the Christian Church, under the direction of Professor Pannell, the organist, showed marked improvement.<sup>3</sup>

Have you noticed how often we talk and talk but no one hears? We speak and speak but no one understands.

We are like the people who gather at the Post Office on Saturday mornings. I am sure that you have seen them. Yesterday there was a group on the Post Office lawn with their signs, "Veterans for Peace," "Pray for Peace," things like that. And on the other side of the street, standing over by the parking meters was another group, with their flags and their signs, "We support President Bush and our troops." As I drove by I caught a glimpse of sign which one of their men was holding which said, "Peace activists are idiots which are useful agents of evil." It was only a single two lane street, Walnut Street, but it looked like a great gulf which separated them.

And I wondered if there was anything at all which could bridge the gulf between them. Is there anything which can bring them together? Which can bring us all together in this day

and time? I don't know!

But before us today is the story of the giving of a great gift, the gift of languages, the ability to speak the message of Jesus to people across the world, and across the street. The ability to translate the language of Christ into the world, so that people will hear and receive it. So that people will respond to it and be changed by it.

Here before us is a gift of the spirit which can produce the miracle of dialogue and communication. And how badly it is needed!

In a little book, published way back in 1963, Ruel Howe talks about *The Miracle of Dialogue*.<sup>4</sup> He says that dialogue is to love what blood is to the body. From the beginning of the individual's life it is communication that guarantees its existence. Mother feeds and bathes, cuddles and sings to her baby, and communicates that she loves and wants her baby. The child learns that she is lovable, accepted and acceptable. Or, if the mother is hostile and irritable and expresses resentment, she communicates a contrary message, that her baby is unlovable, unaccepted and unacceptable.

Relationships between husbands and wives live or die depending upon how well they learn to talk about their experience and share lives together, whether they learn to communicate, whether through dialogue they can share feelings, hopes and fears and frustrations.

The current state of politics and international relations also reveal the desperate need for real dialogue which leads to communication. The human race stands in danger of being destroyed because of the deliberate effort of political parties and national governments to advance their own causes by falsifying the aims and character of their opponents.

What is needed is for parties and nations to come together in honest dialogue, even in the face of criticism from their own people, and talk honestly with each other, and see the other side, and experience the other side.

In this time of threatened tyranny and terrorism we need an alternative to tyranny, and that alternative is dialogue. All of us, whether we function in education, religion, industry or the civic realm, must choose whether we are going to serve our own interests only, or whether we are going to serve the interests of God, and the interests of others, and the greater good of all humanity. When that begins to happen, true dialogue occurs, and new opportunities for resolving conflicts will appear.

At the conclusion of his little book Howe says that the wonderful story of Jesus can be

made known in our generation only by being incarnate in us. The gospel must be embodied in the lives of people like us who have received it and bring it to life in relationship with people in the world where we live. When we are open to one another and to God, miracles of communication happen, forged out of everyday events, the conflicts, failures, misunderstandings and tragedies of living together, as well as out of the love and acceptance which are their source.

Way back in 1962 Bob Dylan wrote and recorded a song which has given us the sermon title today. In his high pitched voice he asked,

How many roads must a man walk down before they call him a man?  
How many times must the cannonballs fly before they're forever banned?  
How many years must some people exist before they're allowed to be free?  
How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?  
How many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry?  
How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?

I don't know the answer to all his questions? And apparently he didn't either, as he said,  
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind!

But this I do know! If we gather together in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, if we continue to read about him and study his life, and learn about his mind and heart, if we saturate ourselves in his spirit, every day we get up and get going the Holy Spirit will start blowing, the spirit of God will send us out into the streets with the love of Jesus, and the power to change the world!

1. Peter J. Gomes sermon, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 293, *Strength for the Journey*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.
2. P. 247-278, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* William E. Tucker and Lester G. McAllister. Saint Louis, Missouri, The Bethany Press, 1975.
3. P. 70-71, *Guided by the Hand of God: The History of First Christian Church, Columbia, Missouri, 1832-1996*. Mary K. Dains, First Christian Church, Columbia, Missouri, 1996.
4. *The Miracle of Dialogue*, Ruel Howe, The Seabury Press, New York, 1963.