

Acts 2:1-21

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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The Day Church Got Weird (and Wonderful)

In 2005, the Harrell family visited Mexico for the first time. Our daughter Lunden was 7, she was this tiny, blonde-haired kid who looked like she'd stepped out of a Scandinavian fairy tale. What no one expected — especially not the waiter in that little restaurant in Mexico — was that she was also fluent in Spanish, thanks to her Cuban mom, who spoke only Spanish at home.

The waiter came over, asked what we'd like, and before any of us could open our menus, Lunden sat up straight and rattled off her entire order in perfect Spanish. The waiter looked like he'd just seen a unicorn order tacos in perfect Spanish, as if it were her first language. It was our little bilingual surprise attack.

We have a multi-lingual surprise attack in this story today.

On Pentecost, something wild and beautiful disrupted the ordinary. The followers of Jesus weren't strategizing or organizing. They were simply waiting. And then the Spirit arrived, not quietly, but with wind and fire.

Acts tells us the Spirit filled the house like a violent wind and settled on each person like flames. Suddenly, they spoke, not just in words, but in many languages, so that strangers from every nation could understand. Don't miss that phrase "strangers from every nation." The Spirit of God being poured out on immigrants to celebrate diversity, equity, and inclusion seems wildly appropriate for Pentecost 2025.

This was the church's beginning, not with a creed or a building, but with a Spirit-fueled eruption that empowered ordinary people to speak, to include, to connect. Pentecost is the anti-Babel: not confusion but clarity, not division but radical connection, not sameness but unity in diversity.

And so today, we pause to ask not just what happened back then, but what is happening *now*. Is the Spirit still moving? Is the church still listening? Are we still speaking?

I. The Spirit Disrupts What's Comfortable

We often like our spirituality to be neat and calm. But Pentecost is anything but. Pentecost is not a Hallmark moment. It's more like a hurricane. A divine disruption. A spiritual interruption.

Imagine being in that upper room when the wind hits. Think of the sudden noise, the wild energy. There's no warning. There's no schedule. The Holy Spirit does not RSVP. She just shows up and blows the doors off the hinges.

That's part of what makes Pentecost so uncomfortable. We're often afraid of losing control, afraid of messiness, noise, unpredictability. And yet that's exactly what the Spirit brings. And not to punish or shame, but to empower. The Spirit does not descend to scold the disciples. She comes to fill them. To send them. To awaken something in them they didn't know was possible.

What if the chaos we're afraid of is actually the birthplace of the church we're longing for? What if the disorientation is the beginning of holy transformation?

Think about your own life for a moment. When was the last time God disrupted your carefully laid plans? When was the last time something unexpected shattered your assumptions and forced you to listen in a new way? Maybe it was a diagnosis. A layoff. A heartbreak. Or maybe it was a phone call from someone you hadn't talked to in years. Sometimes, the Spirit shows up in whispers. But other times, she breaks in like a storm.

And you know, we don't always know it's the Spirit right away. It's only afterward, sometimes years later, that we can look back and say, "Ah. That wind? That fire? That chaos? That was God."

II. The Spirit Speaks Through Every Voice

What happens next is key: they start speaking in other languages. And the crowd outside — people from "every nation under heaven" — hear the message in their *own* tongue.

Notice what this means. The Spirit does not erase difference. The Spirit amplifies it. God does not say, "Everyone learn Hebrew/Greek/Aramaic." God says, "Let the gospel be heard in *every language*." God meets people where they are. The miracle of Pentecost is not that everyone becomes the same. The miracle is that God is revealed in *every voice, every culture, every language*.

In a world increasingly divided by nationalism, racism, and exclusion, Pentecost is a protest. It's God saying: "No more boundaries. No more walls. My message is for all people."

The birth of the church, yes, but the birth of a new humanity, a new creation. "In the last days," God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit upon **all flesh**."

All flesh. Not just some people. Literally, in Greek, “the whole of human nature” or “every physical body.”

Imagine standing in that crowd — an outsider from Egypt or Mesopotamia — marked by different skin, clothing, and language. Then suddenly, this new community speaks *your* language. Fluently. With fire. What would it feel like to be seen and included so clearly?

That’s what the Spirit does. She doesn’t wait for you to assimilate. She comes to where you are and says, “Your voice matters. Your story matters. Your language belongs in the gospel.”

We live in a culture that wants to narrow the gospel, to make it fit neatly inside the walls of nationalism, tribalism, or political ideology. But Pentecost says otherwise. Pentecost says the gospel is not an insider’s secret—it’s an invitation to all. And if our churches are not reflecting that multilingual, multicultural vision, we have to ask: are we really living the Spirit’s dream?

And that message is echoed in Peter’s bold sermon. He quotes Joel’s prophecy: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ...” Sons, daughters, young, old, everyone gets to speak. Everyone gets to see. Everyone gets to dream.

I remember a moment in seminary when one of my classmates, a small, quiet, kind of deferential, Indonesian woman, stood up in class and delivered a sermon that shook the room. She didn’t sound like Calvin. She didn’t quote Barth. It was raw, beautiful, Spirit-drenched truth. That’s Pentecost. When the ones we least expect to lead become the ones we cannot stop listening to.

III. The Spirit Revives What Feels Dead

Before we talk about the Spirit today, let’s go back to Ezekiel’s haunting vision, the Valley of Dry Bones. A wasteland of lifeless, brittle remains. God asks, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel replies, “Lord, only you know.”

Then God says: speak. Not organize, not analyze — just speak life. And as Ezekiel does, the bones rattle, flesh forms, breath enters. A multitude rises, alive again.

This is what the Spirit does. Ezekiel’s vision isn’t just ancient history, it’s about us. Our dry places. Our weary churches. And Pentecost answers the question: Yes. These bones can live.

Even now — as genocide unfolds in Gaza, as the National Guard occupies Los Angeles, as ICE actions spread fear across communities, and migrant siblings live in daily uncertainty — the Spirit is not silent. The dry places in us, the brittle edges of our faith, the tired structures of our churches — they are not beyond resurrection.

Pentecost is God's bold yes to renewal. It is God's, breath filling lungs that had forgotten how to hope.

So when we feel like we've run out of energy, when the church feels more like a relic than a revolution, when we wonder if anything new can rise from what feels worn out — remember the rattling in the valley. Remember the wind in the upper room. Remember that the Spirit still speaks, still stirs, still resurrects.

It says: the church must keep speaking. It says: our diversity is not a threat, it's a gift. It says: the Spirit empowers people others want to silence. It says: God is still showing up in unexpected ways, in drag queens and climate activists, in migrants and mystics, in children and elders, in the wounded and the waking.

I know we all speak English here. But we have another language. Presbyterianese. Christianese. Folks who have no background in these languages need us to speak in a way they understand. We need to work on that, and I have more to say about it at another time.

For now, I think we can speak truth in every language the world understands: the language of compassion, justice, welcome, and grace.

We are called to be that church:

Not just a church with a good mission statement.

Not just a church with a great choir.

But a church on fire.

Because the Spirit is still stirring.

And if we have the courage to say yes,

She will use us—

Every last one of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.