

Holy Smoke! The Church is on Fire!
First Christian Church
Topeka Kansas
Pentecost Day
May 23, 2010

"Holy smoke!! The church is on fire!!" That's what it looks like from here....with so many of you wearing red this morning! "Holy smoke...the church is on fire."

Last Tuesday evening ... our Property Chairperson approached me just before our Cabinet meeting, and said .. "Now I know how you get your inspiration for your sermons." And he presented me with this post-card ... which he found in his Property Team mailbox in the church office. I assured him that I wasn't speaking of a literal fire when I came up with my sermon title! So for those of you who take all words and phrases literally ... let me offer you a word of apology. My sermon title may have been somewhat disquieting to you, and I'm sorry!

But those were the exact words spoken by the late Rev. Marion Rowlen, former pastor of the Maplewood Christian Church in St. Louis Missourias he stood across the street from the church looking on as fire fighters worked to extinguish the flames that were enveloping the old structure. There must have been at least a hundred people that heard Marion Rowlen utter those inimitable words...and in the four years I served that church twenty years later....every one of those 100 people told me the story about the day the church caught fire....and the words of the pastor as he stood across the street watching as the smoke billowed into the air.

This morning is Pentecost Sunday, 2010! And, I might add ... the 34th anniversary of my ordination into Christian ministry! I have always loved this special day in the Christian calendar. I firmly believe this day should be considered one of the big three festivals of the church year, along with Christmas and Easter. I have spent these past three decades trying to convince folks of what a big day this is ... and I'm not sure I have successfully made my case. I think it has something to do with our uncertainty of what we think of the Holy Spirit ... and it may have something to do with the fact that Hallmark and the retail world have not as yet discovered this wonderful day of celebration. But I do thank the worship committee for the beautiful decorations here in the sanctuary this morning, and I hope they remind you of that great story of our faith ... as Luke tells it ... there was something like a tongue of fire ... that rested upon each of the disciples ... and even though the folks present that day spoke at least a half dozen different languages ... everyone seemed to understand. It was the language of the Holy Spirit.

The Revised Common Lectionary Old Testament reading for today ... is a story of radical contrast to the story that you heard from the second chapter of Acts. The Old Testament reading for this day comes from the book of Genesis ... and it's the story of the building of the Tower of Babel. I want to read just a portion of that story to you, so you can get the feel of the contrasting results of what was happening in each event. I am reading the Babel story from The Message ...

Genesis 11¹⁻² At one time, the whole Earth spoke the same language. It so happened that as they moved out of the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled down. ³ They said to one another, "Come, let's make bricks and fire them well." They used brick for stone and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches Heaven. Let's make ourselves famous so we won't be scattered here and there across the Earth." ⁵ GOD came down to look over the city and the tower those people had built. ⁶⁻⁹ GOD took one look and said, "One people, one language; why, this is only a first step. No telling what they'll come up with next—they'll stop at nothing! Come, we'll go down and garble their speech so they won't understand each other." Then GOD scattered them from there all over the world. And they had to quit building the city. That's how it came to be called Babel, because there GOD turned their language into "babble." From there GOD scattered them all over the world.

The Tower of Babel. The day in the life of God's people ... when God became perplexed ... scattered people all over the world and gave them various languages so they couldn't understand each other! Pentecost ... the day in the life of God's people when they came together ... and Luke tells us, they were in one place ... people from all of those places in the world that the scripture reader struggles to pronounce ... every year when we are assigned this passage of scripture. Pentecost day ... the day when people who spoke various different languages ... suddenly, were able to understand each other! Babel ... a day of scattering and shattering ... and confusion. Pentecost ... a day of gathering and bringing together ... and listening. Babel, a story depicting an angry and vindictive God. Pentecost ... an event declaring a unifying Spirit of compassion and hope. Babel ... an event that sent people packing ... and going in all different directions. Pentecost ... an event that ended up with people in the streets declaring the good news of what God had done in Christ!

If you have ever been in situation where you found it impossible to communicate with someone because of a language barrier .. you know something of what it means to experience a Tower of Babel day. Charlotte and I were in a tour group some years ago ... walking down the streets of old Jerusalem ... the old city. If you have ever been there ... you know that the old city streets are lined with merchants who are selling their wares. We were walking the streets ... just window shopping ... when one of our traveling companions from our church ... Pat Miller, came to me with a look of concern on her face. Now, you have to know Pat to appreciate her. She comes up to my chest ... and she's kind of round, and has a wonderful sense of humor to go with it. But Pat came up to me on the street in Jerusalem and she pointed down the street, and with a nervous look in her eye she said "Jim, Do you see that merchant down there that John is talking to?" "Yeah" ... I replied. "Well, I know for a fact that that guy is trying to buy ME! And I don't think John is understanding him."

Well ... we got Pat and John back home to the hotel safe that night, and nobody got sold to anybody! But you know, there really is a need to be cautious when you are traveling in a place where there is a language barrier. You know what I think really brings us up short is when we wake up to find ourselves in Tower of Babel experience right here in our own homeland. Where we have wonderful modes of communication. When we experience barriers to good communication in the family with your spouse ... sometimes it surprises us, doesn't it?

Charlotte and I attended the Topeka West High School Band concert ... back when Andrew was in the band there One of their selections featured a guest artist, who was a fabulous clarinet player. On the way home, Andrew said to me ... "What'd you think of that Clarinet player. He was really tight, wasn't he?" My first thought was ... well, he didn't appear to be loose ... but did that necessarily make him what was it 'tight'? Does it surprise you sometimes when you discover that sometimes you aren't speaking the same language ... even with the people that you love the most? Am I the only one here this morning who has a little bit of the old "Tower of Babel" syndrome when I listen to the voices of a much younger generation? Probably not.

It really does bring us up short sometimes doesn't it ... when we have to acknowledge that we are speaking a lot of different languages ... and we may not be hearing each other! Especially when it is the people we love the most!

And even more frightening than this verbal communication barrier that we sometimes experience ... but when we discover that even our most basic values for living out our lives have somehow experienced the Tower of Babel syndrome ... that's when it really gets scary! Like, when you watch a television program with your young adult child, and you say something like "You know, I have some real problems with the message this program is advocating. I mean this isn't what I believe about sexual mores or I have problems with their abusive use of power or I don't like the way they are portraying police or what it is communicating about opulence and wealth. Or what it is communicating about violence. And your kid looks at you with that look that asks ... "Really now Dad. Are you ready to join the real world now dad? Do you care to join the 21st

century?" Do you know that feeling, or am I the only one that senses the tower of babel stuff really just about every day? Am I the only one? And tell me is it still the judgment of God that we are bringing on ourselves?

Generation gaps. Escalating rates of family conflict divorce ... domestic violence. And what about when this failure to communicate seems to grip us here at the church. I mean ... if there were ever to be a place that was to be characterized by its understanding and love and grace and communication I should personally think it would be the church of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace! But get a group of pastors together and ask them how it goes with people understanding people in their churches today. And then stand back. Get ready for a barrage of frustration and disappointing dialog. Because I have been there in those groups. And I can tell you conflict in the church is probably at an all time high in the mainline church of America today. What we have here ... so often my friends is a failure to communicate. And the lack of understanding today ... is nothing less than the judgment we bring upon ourselves when we don't care enough to listen to each other, and to try to understand ... and to pledge to love each other, whether we agree with each other or not! When I think of the things that break down communication and impede human understanding between the generations within marriages and families and right here in the church today my friends, what we have here is a failure to communicate.

And I want to tell you what the antidote is to this virus that has affected communication and understanding among the people with whom we love the most. And that is the Spirit!

It is the Spirit that allows us to persevere in our conversations into the wee hours to try to bring about understanding! It is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to speak a language of hope ... even in the midst of despair.

Last Thursday morning ... the question came up in our discussion of this Bible text ... when have we experienced the Holy Spirit in a profound way ... in a way that empowered and brought hope and a spirit of unity. Several of our Elders shared stories out of their lives that had a profound effect on their faith journey. After the meeting ... I asked Elaine Bryan if she would share with you ... what she shared with us last Thursday morning. Elaine.

You do know, do you not ... that there are several types of communication that just seem to be universal. I mean a hug. It says a lot without really saying anything, doesn't it. A smile. Laughter. Tears. A grasp of a hand. A hand clap. That look in your eye that you sometimes give without saying anything. It communicates.

Last Friday evening Charlotte and I pulled in to the parking lot of a local eatery here in Topeka ... and I parked the car beside one of those vehicles that had bumper stickers plastered all over it ... telling me more than I really wanted to know about the beliefs of the person who owned the vehicle. It told me who he voted for in the last election ... in fact ... there were two or three bumper stickers that told who he voted for. I knew how he felt about guns ... and how he felt about abortion ... and how he felt about the majority of the folks in our legislature. He also had a bumper sticker that said ... "SPEAK ENGLISH!" ...the Wonderful language of America." I'm sure he meant to say "North America" ... even though Latin America ... South America ... are also a part of America ... and most folks there do NOT speak ENGLISH. There was also one bumper sticker on that car that suggested where I might go if I didn't agree with what the owner believed in. I could start packing ...

I can imagine there were some folks in Jerusalem on the day of that special Pentecost ... in the midst of that city that had attracted Parthians ... and Medes and people from Mesopotamia and Pamphylia ... and Cretans ... and Arabs. They probably had bumper stickers on their camels that said .. SPEAK HEBREW! It's the wonderful language of good Jews!" Little did they know though ... that if they had just tried a little bit ... if they had just listened ... they might have heard the message in their own language. A language of compassion.

When we are passionate about speaking that language, friends ... the message of God's love will spread like a wild fire.

And people will surely say ... Like good ole brother Rowlen "Holy Smoke! The Church IS on Fire!"

Amen