



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, TN  
May 19, 2024  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
Sermon: "From Dissonance to Harmony"

**Acts 2:1-11 (NRSV)**

2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

2:2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

2:3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

2:4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

2:5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.

2:6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

2:7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"

2:8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

2:9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

2:10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

2:11 Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

## “From Dissonance to Harmony”

The Second chapter of the book of Acts reports that the believers were “all together in one place.” Let’s test that, shall we? I want to do a brief thought experiment with you. It worked at my last church when I did it before. Let’s see about Westminster:

It’s going to take a bit of math in your head, so bear with me.

- Everyone think of a number between 2 and 10.
- Now Multiply that number by 9.
- Now if you have a 2-digit number, add those 2 digits together. For example, if you have 35, add 3+5 and you’ll get 8.
- Ok, now subtract 5.
- You should have a single digit in your mind now. Find the corresponding letter of the alphabet to that number: for example, 1 is A; 2 is B; 3 is C and so on. Do you have a letter?
- Think of a country that begins with that letter.
- Now think of an animal that begins with the last letter of that country.
- Now think of a fruit that begins with the last letter of that animal.

By a raise of hands, how many people are in Denmark, with a kangaroo, eating an orange?

This is a common thought experiment used in a number of different settings. I learned it in Asheville, at the Racial Equity Institute, a 2-day continuing education event, where we learned about systemic and historical inequalities between white communities and communities of Color.<sup>1</sup>

Why do this thought-experiment at the Racial Justice Institute? The math works out that, if you do it right, you should have landed on 4, which corresponds to the letter D. The question then is: Why, when asked to come up with a country that

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://racialequityinstitute.org>

begins with D, the majority of us, myself included, think Denmark, a country 45-hundred miles away in the middle of Europe, instead of, say, the Dominican Republic, roughly 3 and half times closer to our coast?

The Racial Justice institute did this to show how our thinking is Eurocentric, and still dominated by the history of colonialism. This history tells us that Europe, not Latin America, is the center of the world, even when it's half a world away. So, if our minds get overloaded with some silly math, and someone asks us to name a random country, we think of Europe.

“They were altogether in one place.”

Of course, the Book of Acts means something different by that. Followers of Jesus were altogether, and the Holy Spirit came upon them with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind.”

In the Bible, wind is equated to life itself. We breathe because God puts the air in our lungs.

The book of Genesis says God made the first human:  
*from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7-8).*

Likewise, in Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones, when the whole host of Israel lay scattered, in the desolation of the Babylonian exile, God says to Ezekiel:  
*Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live (Ezekiel 37:4-5).*

So, when the Holy Spirit descends upon all the believers with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” we are to see this as a spiritual rebirth, the church infused with the very breath and life of God.

One might think this Spiritual Rebirth unites the disciples and brings them all into uniformity.

In fact, it's the opposite. The very breath of God does not erase the individuality of each member of the church, so they each proclaim the church's company line. If anything, the Holy Spirit engenders difference:

*All of them...began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability...Amazed and astonished, [onlookers] asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear each of us in our native language?' (Acts 2:4, 8).*

They learn to speak the Gospel in other languages. It's not uniformity, it's a cacophony of tongues. The Holy Spirit doesn't erase difference. By translating the Gospel into different languages, the Spirit teaches us to appreciate difference.

Liberation theologian Willie James Jennings, in his commentary of this passage, contrasts what happens in Acts from the history of colonialism so tied to the history of the Christian church and its evangelism to the world.

In much of that history, native tongues and indigenous cultures were flattened and erased, replaced by the language and worldview of the conqueror. This sermon, and these Scripture readings, after all, come to us today in English.

In Dr. Jennings' words,

*Imagine centuries of submission and internalized hatred of mother tongues and in the quiet spaces of many villages, many homes, women, men and children practicing these new [colonial] languages not by choice but by force.<sup>2</sup>*

You see, whereas in Acts, onlookers heard the Gospel, each in their native language, in colonialism, native tongues, native ideas, native spiritualities were squashed, by a Gospel turned into a tool of conquest, an ideology that supported stealing land, resources, and people all in the name of God.

Colonial Christianity demanded submission, quashing not only culture and language but also differences in belief. it was deeply creedal. There is one right way to believe, the church's way.

That history continues to touch us too. And not only when the first country with a 'D' that comes to mind...is Denmark.

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<sup>2</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 31. The original text read, "Practicing these new enlightened languages." I changed the adjective to help the congregation understand the author's intent and argument.

At my last church, there was a woman whom I was always after to join the church. That was one of my responsibilities as an associate pastor. I would contact perspective members, ask if they were interested, talk them through the process, and arrange meetings with staff and Session. I was good at that job, by the way. We'd have these huge membership classes, sometimes 5-10 people at a time.

This woman at my last church had been there for years; she was there every time the doors opened. In fact, my very first Sunday at that church, when I came down for an interview weekend, I attended the church incognito, just as a random guest, to learn more about worship there before I was hired. And this woman and her partner were the first people to introduce themselves to me, and welcome me on behalf of the church.

I was really surprised when I found out she wasn't already a member. So, after I joined on staff, I would ask her, on occasion, if they were interested in joining in membership. And she would always, kind of just shrug, or brush me off: 'Not now. We're still thinking about it.'

One day she met me in my office, and she told me the reason. It is because the Book of Order in the PC(USA) says that each new member of our denomination is asked, "Do you believe Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior?" And the title, "Lord and Savior" never sit right with her.

She was a retired lawyer. And in the late 80s, coming up through law school, she said sexism and homophobia were rampant. She was constantly dismissed for who she was, and who she wasn't.

And after those decades of struggle, to worship someone as Lord, which she read as a masculine and patriarchal title, left a bad taste in her mouth. And as much as I could, I understood where she was coming from, so I stopped asking.

And then one day, she and her partner joined. And when we asked that question, about Jesus being your Lord and Savior:

We said something to the effect of: 'We know, many people take 'Lord and Savior' to mean many different things. For some, it means Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, "light of light, True God of True God," as the creed puts it.

For others, it means they see God's light and love shining in the unique ways Jesus lived, and loved, and lives again today, proclaiming justice and inclusion for all.

And then others are still in the process of discerning how to find meaning in those words, and perhaps they would use different words to describe how they see God in Jesus, and that's okay too. We want you to take this question in the way that it makes sense to you in your journey, in the way that gives life to your faith.'

And this woman and her partner both said 'yes' to the question.

And ever since then, I've said something similar in every new member Session meeting I've led. Maybe I use a few less words than that.

I have found, in my short years in ministry, that the Spirit calls us in different ways, to speak the Gospel in different ways, different languages.

We come together because we believe God calls us, and unites us around common values of love, justice, and grace. But that doesn't mean we all have to believe the exact same thing.

What if, instead of a place that demands uniformity, the new life promised by the Spirit is a fellowship of people gathered, around a common awe and appreciation of the mysteries of this life and other things divine - each of us trying together to make sense of these mysteries in the best ways that we can?

- And instead of trying to squash difference or steamroll over particularity, instead we pursue these mysteries in a series of deep and varied conversations about what it means to be people of faith today?
- And even more, we come together, propelled by the life of Spirit and the mysteries of life, to work together, in countless acts of grace and justice, for people in and outside of these walls?
- And the church was a place, not defined by a litmus test of right belief that decides who is in and who is out, but instead a place where we appreciate how we see God in one another's eyes, in the differences of each face, in the unique experiences each of us brings to this community?

Westminster Presbyterian Church is a place like that. Honestly, that's the only way I know how to be the church. Know that wherever you find yourself along the journey of faith, there is a place for you here.

I heard an interview this week with Dr. Tema Bryant, who is both a minister and the former President of the American Psychological Association. She opened with these words:

*For some people, religion and spirituality have been their lifeline, their resource. It's the reason why they have survived. And then for other people, it has been the source of their greatest trauma. And both things are true. And usually, depending on your life experience, it's hard to acknowledge the other. So, people who love their faith and love their church, are like, 'How dare people talk about it?' And then those who have been harmed in those spaces, are like, 'How can anything good come from it? It's all shame, and blame.'*<sup>3</sup>

That second set of experiences that Dr. Bryant names, 'all shame and blame,' for many people, that's the only way they know the church to be. When churches mirror histories of colonialism and demand uniformity, they leave a trail of hurt people in their wake.

In the aftermath of those stories, in the aftermath of painful histories of the church writ large, the second chapter of the Book of Acts reaches out to us today. It calls on us to discern how the Spirit is gathering us, to be the church today, in a different way.

There is new life in that call, that call to be a community:

- that invites curiosity instead of condemnation,
- that affirms inclusion instead of drawing borders,
- that discerns a God of justice at work in this town instead of a Spirit who stops talking after we step out the door.

Let us keep an ear out, for that Spirit that speaks to us, each in our own native tongue.

Let's keep an ear out, for that Spirit, who binds us together. And makes us the Church.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> From *Soul Bloom*, "Thema Bryant: Can Religious Trauma be Healed?" April 30, 2024. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/thema-bryant-can-religious-trauma-be-healed/>