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Day of Pentecost
Genesis 11:1-9

A Different Kind of Pentecost Story¹

Someone told me recently that about 52%, more than half, of people under 30 have never been to church.¹ It's startling to consider. I've been researching that statistic to see what that's all about—the parameters of the study and such, but there's no doubt that the Christian church isn't the central thing it used to be. The Presbyterian Church (USA), where I serve, just released its membership statistics and there was cause for celebration. No, we didn't grow; it's just that there were fewer losses than the previous year. The membership declined by 89,296 in 2013, compared to 102,791 in 2012.

Hallelujah???

So as I look at the story of Pentecost in the book of Acts, I have a hard time relating it to the here and now. Oh, it's an amazing story. Tongues of fire, a violent wind, God's deeds of power being proclaimed in every language. But this is not exactly the story of *our* time. Take a look at Acts 2: the masses come running—*running* to this ragtag band of Christians. They want to know what the ruckus is all about! When's the last time we raised a ruckus that got the attention of the outside world? Since when do people outside the church *run* to see what the church is up to?

The people, the seekers, come to the early Christians, saying, "What's up? Tell us what this means." And, Peter responds.

He responds by quoting scripture.

Decent response to a bunch of Jews in the first century, but have you tried it lately? Most of us inside the church don't like having scripture quoted at us—you can only imagine what people outside the church think about it. I'm not saying the scripture is unimportant, I am saying that in a culture that is less and less fluent in biblical language, it's not an effective place to start.

So, are we floundering on Pentecost without a text? Have no fear; we have a Pentecost story. It's not where we'd expect to find it, perhaps; it's way back in the book of Genesis, and it's a story of a group of people, working together, trying to build a tower into the heavens. It begins, innocently enough, with a building campaign.

The book of Acts shows us where it all began—those amazing deeds of power that set Christians apart from the rest of the culture. But we need to fast forward from that, a few hundred years to the fourth century... when the emperor of Rome, Constantine, declares Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. This is great on the one hand—no more persecutions, right? But with the silver lining came the cloud: In that moment Christianity became inextricably tied with the powers that be. The foundation of the tower was laid.

As the official religion, baptisms began to occur by the hundreds—not necessarily because people believed in Jesus, but because that's what everyone did to be an upstanding citizen. In fact baptism

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and citizenship were intertwined in many places—you can see how that would water down the gospel.

And the tower got a little higher.

Fast forward through centuries of history, through the Crusades, in which the line between religious and political power gets blurry... and the tower gets higher. And the colonial period, in which Western nations colonize the developing world, bringing Western Christianity with them... and the tower gets higher. Even here in North America, where we claim to value the separation of church and state, the doctrine of manifest destiny is infused with religious language as well as political language. The two are intertwined. One language.

I'm not saying that there weren't good things that happened too. But bit by little bit, what had started as a counter-cultural movement became established—a towering pillar of the community that seems to stretch into the heavens. Influential. And the building of the tower continues today: Whenever we try to build our way into relevance, wherever and whenever we care more about the institution of Christianity than the way of Jesus, whenever the church stands on the side of the powerful, the tower gets built again. And we make a name for ourselves.

But that disestablishment has happened, bit by little bit. You all know this here in Seattle in a way that other areas of the country don't. The culture is more diverse than ever before, pluralism is the name of the game, until...

Here we sit, having made a name for ourselves like the folks in Genesis... but what does that name mean anymore?

Here we sit, The Church, enclosed, but not protected, by our stone and mortar, our steeples with their tops in the heavens... as 90,000

Is this a cause for despair? Some say yes. Some say that this disestablishment is the worst thing to have happened to the church, that secularism and pluralism are a threat... I say it's one of the greatest opportunities for mission in centuries. Because now we can't rely on Christianity as just "something everyone does." We have to make the case now. And if we can't survive in the marketplace of ideas, if we can't make our case in a compelling way, then maybe Christianity doesn't deserve to survive.

I think it does, though—but we have to be able to say why being a Christian matters, how following Jesus makes a difference in our lives. Some folks say that we are in a new Reformation. Every several hundred years the church has the opportunity to reinvent itself to speak more faithfully. I believe we're in a similar place today.

There's no longer one language—the language of the culture and the language of the church used to be one and the same. We have to learn a new language.

In the midst of all this, I wonder if, just like in the book of Genesis, God's looking at what we've built over the centuries since Constantine and saying, "Would you get a load of this. No. This common language they speak, that's not what I intended. This just won't do."

And so God begins confusing the language. We need to learn new ways of communicating the faith.

And then comes the fun part:

Just like the Tower of Babel story, God is scattering us.

God's scattering us, because followers of Jesus aren't supposed to be brick-stacking, mortar-slathering people. We want to be. It's so much easier, and safer. We're good at it. Just look at the towers we construct: attractive buildings, sensible polity, well-built theologies. All good things—make no mistake about it. The problem comes when we say, like the people in Genesis, "We build this tower, **otherwise** we will be scattered." We try to hide behind that **otherwise**: let's busy ourselves over here so maybe God won't notice that we're still basically expecting people to come to our tower—to our turf, on our terms.

We are called to be a scattered people.
And that's why the tower of Babel is our 21st century Pentecost story.

God scatters us and will scatter us over the face of the earth, and that's where the church is—lounging in the Starbucks, waiting at the car wash, sprinting to a meeting at the office, meeting a friend for lunch, strolling to 5th period algebra. Towers are wonderful only as places that where we get our batteries charged, where we learn what we need to learn to take the good news of Jesus Christ into the world. Maybe we need to think of our churches as foreign language schools. We need to learn how to speak the language of faith in terms people understand, but it's no good to learn a language and then not use it. We've gotta take off the headphones and turn off the language tapes and put away the worksheets and go talk to the native speakers.

Donald Miller has written a memoir called *Blue Like Jazz* that chronicles his journey growing up in an evangelical church and moving beyond that. He tells of going to Reed College, one of the most secular schools in the country. (See chapter 11 of the book for this story.) There were about eight students in his Christian fellowship while he was there, and Christianity was frowned upon, to say the least, by most of the student body and faculty. It wasn't uncommon to see bumper stickers like "Too bad we can't feed the Christians to the lions anymore." Every year Reed has an event called Ren Fayre in which most of the student body gets drunk and stoned in a weekend-long party. One year a few weeks before Ren Fayre Don was joking with a friend that the Christian group should set up a booth in the middle of the campus with a sign that said, "Confess Your Sins." His friend Tony looked at him, his face lit up, and said, "That's exactly what we're going to do."

Tony presented the idea to the group: "Don has an idea!" Don responded, "No I don't! It was a *joke!*" Tony said, "We're going to set up a confession booth in the middle of Ren Fayre..."

"Only *we're* going to be the ones confessing.

"We will apologize—apologize for the Crusades, for televangelists, for any and all ways the church has fallen short of the teachings of Jesus. We will confess our neglect for the poor, our own self-righteousness, our own failure to love the world as Jesus did. And we will ask forgiveness."

And Don was thinking, "This is even worse than my idea." The fact is, people on campus had been openly hostile and even brutal to those who were Christian, and the *Christians* were going to apologize? Nonetheless, the group decided to go for it. They built a huge shack in the middle of the quad and posted a sign: Confession Booth. On the night of Ren Fayre, it was decided that Don would man the booth first. A guy named Jake strolled by and said, "So what, you want to hear all the juicy gossip of what I did from Ren Fayre?" And Don said, "No, actually I want to confess to you; see, I'm a

Christian, and throughout time Christians have hurt and even killed others in the name of their faith.” Jake answered with a laugh, “Aw man, I’m sure you didn’t have anything to do with all that.”

But Don went on, talking about what Jesus called us to do and to be and the ways he’d fallen short. And Jake started to see that he was serious. And Jake started to take it seriously. He said, “You know, I don’t want to be a Christian or anything, but who was this Jesus guy?” And Don told him the story of Jesus, who he was and what he taught. And as he left, Jake’s eyes were watering a little and he said, “This is cool, man. This is important. I’m going to tell other people what you’re doing and to come here.”

Now if this were a Hollywood ending, I could report that dozens of Reed College students dedicated their lives to Jesus Christ that night! This is not a Hollywood ending. But I can tell you that many, many more people came by the booth that night. Many left in tears. Many left embracing one another. It wasn’t a Hollywood ending, but in the midst of a weekend-long campus party, here was something real. Here was something authentic, and people felt it. And Don said, “I went in to the booth with doubts, and came out believing so strongly in Jesus I was ready to die and be with him.”

I think it’s no accident that after this Tower of Babel story, God doesn’t speak again until chapter 12, and that’s to Abram, and the first word out of God’s mouth is Go.

Go, Abram... and I will make your name great.

We’re not going to make a name for ourselves. God’s got the compass and the map. All we’re asked to do is go.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Courtesy of Carol Howard Merritt, author of *Tribal Church* and *Reframing Hope*.