

THE UNHINDERED GOSPEL¹
Acts 2: 1-21
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Pentecost is an extreme concept and not a little scary for churches like ours. We like things to be fairly predictable and well-planned. No wonder this story of Pentecost might make us a little jumpy.

I

The New Testament book that we call The Acts of the Apostles was written by the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke. It was a two-volume work, and when you put them both together, it must have been quite a large task for Luke. But when he came to the end of the book of Acts, the last scene is the Apostle Paul under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his eventual execution under Emperor Nero. But amazingly the last sentence in the book seems to burst with the theme of freedom: *He lived there two whole years at this own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*²

The very last word in the book of Acts is unusual because it is an adverb, of all grammatical things! In Greek it is the word *akolutos*, which

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² Acts 28: 30-31.

means ~~un~~unhinderedly.+ So the last few words of Acts say, ...*preaching and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and...[akolutos]...unhinderedly*. It is truly an odd word with which to end his important account. But throughout his two volumes, Luke never lost sight of his purpose, and he seemed to plan the last words well, achieving the final effect by the last stroke of his pen. *Unhinderedly*, Luke wrote with a relish, describing the hard-won liberty of the gospel.

II

That unhindered liberty is the theme of Pentecost, and it is that unhindered-ness that makes us nervous. The story begins with these words: *When the day of Pentecost had come*. It was an important day in the traditional Jewish calendar. It celebrated the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai fifty days after Passover. It was the birth of Judaism! And now, fifty days after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Luke describes the birth of the church amid flashes of wind and fire not unlike the flashes of wind and fire on Mount Sinai centuries before.

It happened, we are told, amid a *rushing wind*, like the wind at creation that hovered over the face of the deep when God let loose the creation of the world. Something was also seen, like Moses must have seen the lightening on Mount Sinai, but this time it is described as something like divided tongues of fire that rested upon each of them.

Today bishops wear red hats formed in the stylized shape of these divided tongues, but the story is clear that you don't need to be a bishop to receive this tongue of fire. And you don't need male chromosomes! That is part of the empowering message of this day. Something powerful was experienced by everyone, not just a privileged male elite, so powerful that it involved both speech and hearing.

It was an international audience, a crowd divided by race and nationality and language, divided by age-old fears and prejudices, divided by feuds and poisoned memories of past atrocities, divided by humiliations and put-downs, racial stereotypes and hurtful jokes; divided by nationalism and racial pride; divided by gender and customs and sexual orientation and political affiliations; divided by skin color and clothing and food preferences; divided like the world and its peoples are today- yet they could all understand!

Imagine what the story of Pentecost, understood as symbolic rather than literal, could mean to a world so divided! What if the Spirit swept over North Korea, so that Kim Il Sung could really understand the resentment and anxiety of South Korea? What if the Spirit swept over Congress, so that there could be a true mutual hearing and understanding across our differences? What if the Spirit swept over our churches, so that differences would be heard and respected, and following the Way of Christ could be

central? What if the Spirit swept over the generations, so that all ages could hear and understand one another? If anyone ever thinks that the biblical story of Pentecost is a dusty old religious tale that has no contemporary relevance, let them consider how absolutely critical it is today for us to hear and understand one another.

III

Now there is more to say: the Pentecost story is, I believe, deliberately told as a reversal of the ancient Tower of Babel story. Remember that old story from the book of Genesis? It was a primitive way to answer the question: why do we speak different languages? It tells of humanity trying to build a tower to heaven. But at Pentecost, heaven comes down to us! Instead of all the power and exertion of human effort to reach heaven, heaven reaches right down to our neighborhoods, our churches, our homes. Babel's unity is based on centralized control that conscripted everyone in a totalitarian building project. Pentecost is a unity based on the spirit of love poured into our hearts and a real understanding of one another.

Note this: at Pentecost the languages do not become the same. Pentecost is not a mono-language movement! The languages and cultures remain different in all their color and variations. The church, in other words, was not born in an attempt to make everyone the same, and whenever the

church tries to do that, it is attempting to reverse Pentecost! Pentecost is a celebration of our colorful differences in the midst of our oneness. The Spirit is a wind, not a wall. It does not separate us, it blows new life on all of us equally.

So the Spirit came ~~un~~hinderedly+ sweeping down over all, not just an elite corps of leaders, not just the ordained, not just the theologically trained, not just on males. The spirit-formed church was for everyone. It has less to do with speaking in tongues than in really listening to one another and understanding that in spite of all our differences, we are still loved and respected. Pentecost is about reaching out and embracing all our differences and really hearing one another. This is one of the historic strengths of this church and this community: it is a place of refuge for those who have been left out, shut out, or driven out, or beaten out. And we have been such a place of refuge for generations.

IV

I think of this Pentecost story like I think of new parents trying to tell the story of the birth of their baby. They give every little detail. even more than some want to hear! They are determined that they are not going to make the same mistakes they think their parents made with them. They will do everything they can to protect this new baby from anything that would hinder this child's healthy growth and development.

But then the weeks and months go by- life sets in. They have to learn the hard way that they will make mistakes. They will say things or do things or make wrong decisions that they will regret later. Outside forces will come to bear that will hinder the child's healthy growth and development. Things happen- and character is what we build in spite of the hindrances. But at the birth, we promise that this child will grow unhinderedly.+

Now this story is a birth story. The writer is like a new parent. Later in the history of the church reality will set in. Leaders will make mistakes. They will say things and do things that hinder the healthy growth of the church. The church family will feud; divisions will take place; outside forces will come to bear that will cause the church to grow in unhealthy ways. But through it all, the Spirit still blows fresh life into the church, so that we can come to a day like this one and experience a freshness blowing our way.

V

The well known author and preacher Fred Craddock speaks of Pentecost when he tells about a lecture he was giving. A few years ago, when he was on the west coast speaking at a seminary, just before the first lecture, one of the students stood up and said, "Before you speak, I need to know if you are Pentecostal." The room grew silent. Craddock said he looked around for the Dean of the seminary! He was nowhere to be found.

The student continued with his quiz right in front of everybody. Craddock was taken aback, and so he said, "Do you mean do I belong to the Pentecostal Church?" He said, "No, I mean are you Pentecostal?" Craddock said, "Are you asking me if I am charismatic?" the student said, "I am asking you if you are Pentecostal." Craddock said, "Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?" He said, " I want to know if you are Pentecostal." Craddock said, "I don't know what your question is." The student said, "Obviously, you are not Pentecostal." He left.

So I leave you today with that same question: are you Pentecostal? Not, are you in the Pentecostal denomination? not, are you charismatic? not, do you speak in tongues. Pentecost is much deeper than that. Are you? are we? Pentecostal? If so, the Good News will spread unhinderedly.+