

FPCU May 24, 2026 Pentecost Sunday Rev. Dr. Tina Blair

Many Peoples, One Spirit

Scripture: Acts 2:1-18

Isn't it wonderful to hear our scriptures in other languages? Thank you: Hellen (Swahili), Blanca (Spanish)! I read in French. It makes you realize how our faith is spread all over this beautiful world.

Have you ever had an encounter with people who did not speak English, or your native tongue, and yet, somehow, you felt a connection? Somehow, you were able to communicate with gestures, and head signals like nods and smiles. When I was 17, spending the summer in France, I was traveling to southern France. I had to change trains at midnight and when I got on the train, the only available seat was in a compartment with 3 other men; actually 2 men and 1 boy. I hesitated, a girl traveling alone, but finally entered and huddled in a corner. The boy and his father were speaking to each other in Spanish. Eventually the other man said something in German, which it turned out the older man could speak, because he had worked in Germany. Then the German began speaking to me in English. Before you know it, we could all speak to each other – English to German to Spanish and back again. By dawn, the Spaniard was pulling out his thermos of coffee and passing it around to share. I was warned that it was laced with cognac, so I did not partake of this gift (!). This midnight trip was, for me, a God moment – humanity united by one spirit across the divisions of culture and language.

Imagine what it must have been like on this day of Pentecost for the people gathered there. Pentecost, Shavuot, in Judaism, is the celebration of the grain harvest, 50 days after the Passover. It also celebrates the giving of the Law, the Torah, to Moses at Sinai. The first fruits of wheat and barley are to be offered to the Lord and the Torah, the Bible, celebrated. So on this day, faithful believers, good God-believing Jews from all over the world had gathered to celebrate. Picture it – a babble of sound, of different languages, shrugs, expressions. And then, the Holy Spirit is poured onto the disciples and these foreigners can understand them in their own native language! How can this be?

This story is often contrasted to the Tower of Babel story. So let's listen to that story in Genesis 11:1-9, and see what we can learn.

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And

they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

This story is telling us that people start building, using their wealth and power, to try to reach the heavens. They use their one language to get the materials and the workers to do this. They want to show off their wealth and strength with the tower. They are challenging God – they want to act like gods. It is the sin of pride. The One Holy True God is not pleased. They are gathering enough power to do whatever they want. Implied is that God believes that what these people want to do with their power will **not** accord with what God would want. So God gives them different languages and scatters them, and the works of human vainglory are over.

Now traditionally, God’s act of “confusing them” with different language has been seen as **punishment** for sin. Thus, the act at Pentecost of uniting them through the Holy Spirit is seen as a healing act, countering the Tower of Babel sin. There is much truth there. But what if there is more to these events than this understanding? The sin here clearly is that they want to be gods, and they are using their wealth and manpower to do so. And of course they are using their language in the same way! Language shapes how we understand our world. With one language, they can control what people say and what they hear. With one language they can control the narrative, the story of who they are. I can imagine the leaders, priests and kings, spreading the word about how important it is to spend your wealth on building this tower. For workers, what a privilege to be part of this building project, even if you are underpaid! Of course, it will honor God and be more important than irrigation systems to water the fields and feed the people! It will be a symbol of our unity – all of us are the same and superior to all other peoples! And so forth – you can imagine it too, can’t you?

What is it about humankind that we want our kind of people to be superior to other kinds of people? When I studied anthropology, I learned that many of the North American Indian tribes called themselves “the People.” I know this also from personal experience when I taught in the Navajo Nation, who name themselves, “the Dineh,” the People. The implication can be that all others are not “the people,” not fully human, or not fully as important or equal. (I’m not saying the Dineh do that)

The leaders that aimed at creating a tower that would make them like gods used their wealth, their manpower, and their language for power and pride. They were clearly aiming to show the rest of the world that they were superior – you’ve got to join us; you can’t fight us. This is claim of superiority is the other sin that God is trying to counter in the Babel story.

In the beginning, the book of Genesis tells us, “*God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God he created them; male and female they were created*” (Gen. 1:27). And then God blessed them. I repeat: **all of humankind, every human being, is created in God’s image and blessed by God.**

To set this situation right, the people were scattered and given different languages. Was this punishment or was it a **gift**?

You see, God values the diversity of languages and cultures that God created, as the Bible shows. At the same time, God wants humans to cross the barriers that these differences create. You see this, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew (1:1ff), where Matthew lists Jesus’ ancestors: listen for which mothers are on this list as I skip through the genealogy:

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron (etc).... and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse,⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the **wife of Uriah**,⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam....*

And so on, down to Joseph, and then Jesus. The women listed, besides Tamar (and she does something strange – read Genesis 38) are Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba -- each a foreigner. And yet they are honored in the Hebrew Scriptures and in our New Testament (Jesus’ ancestors). Sometimes humans get it right; we reach across

differences of language and culture and offer welcome. And in return, we are richly rewarded with love and in this case, offspring and family.

This is what we humans are called to do because God has helped each of our cultures to flourish. Each culture and each language bring rich ways to view the world, to understand human and spiritual life, to act and behave in order to create community. Out of each culture come beautiful writing, architecture and arts. I believe God loves this. But it is very difficult when cultures come together, isn't it?!! We don't understand that other language and the ways the people act. We judge and condemn.

However, all this changes with Pentecost. On this day, all these peoples from all around the known world were united, understood what was being said. They were not asked to change who they were. The disciples were given the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ and God the Father, to communicate and welcome and explain. And the Spirit worked to open the minds and ears of those who were gathered there.

We the church have been given this Spirit, and with the Spirit, the power, to live as God calls us to – to overcome the divisions of Babel. We are to welcome the differences and reach out in unity. The place I've experienced this the most is in our international churches abroad. At the American Church in Paris, when I got up to preach in its high pulpit, I looked out at Christ's church around the world gathered below me – up to 50 countries represented, all economic groups, from refugees to ambassadors, from nannies living in garrets to the vice-presidents of rich American companies living in elegant houses. The ushers there are a mixture of Filipinos, Africans, French and Asian – and some Americans. It's not easy leading a church with that many cultural differences – but it is a joy. I learned so much and my faith was made much deeper! The Spirit is very present!

We here in the United States can be very insular. We are a large country, so we turn in on ourselves. We are trying to stay united even though every generation is filled with people who have come from different cultures, languages and backgrounds. This is hard work! Traditionally, the church has worked to reach across barriers and welcome everyone, wherever they are from. We Presbyterians have had churches in a lot of different languages: until recently in my lifetime, we still had churches with services in Hungarian, in Welsh, in Czech, in Polish and so forth. Today we have churches that worship in Korean, Thai, Lao, Cambodian, Spanish, Arabic, and more.

The Holy Spirit helps us to reach across barriers, going beyond a simple welcome and basic tolerance. The Spirit urges us to learn from these others, to share with these others. And let's be honest: we live in a time when, instead of cultivating mutual understanding, our culture is cultivating distrust, anger and hate. Instead of creating open doors of welcome, of sitting at table together, we are seeing walls with no windows or doors being built, isolating individual groups.

Let's find ways to fling open the doors of welcome the world! We are already enriched with the membership of our African families – have you European-Americans spent time to know them? Do you know that each nation, each tribe, is unique in Africa, in Latin America, is unique? What could we learn from their rich backgrounds? When I visited Ghana, I discovered that they dance when they worship. Could we learn to do that occasionally? (laugh!)

And how can we reach out to be healers in the time of division? As we do the Mission Study, will God show us ways in which we can do this, working in our neighborhoods, offering welcome and understanding?

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is here! I believe that the Holy Spirit will guide us, step by step, to find ways to do this – that we will continue to fling open our doors to welcome young and old, rich and poor, African, Asian, European and Hispanic peoples. We may be many peoples – but we have one Spirit, one God, one Church. Amen!

Offertory Prayer

Acts 2:1-6

Quand le jour de la Pentecôte arriva, ils étaient tous rassemblés au même endroit. ² Tout à coup, un grand bruit survint du ciel : c'était comme si un violent coup de vent s'abattait sur eux et remplissait toute la maison où ils se trouvaient assis. ³ Au même moment, ils virent apparaître des sortes de langues qui ressemblaient à des flammèches. Elles se séparèrent et allèrent se poser sur la tête de chacun d'eux. ⁴ Aussitôt, ils furent tous remplis du Saint-Esprit et commencèrent à parler dans différentes langues, chacun s'exprimant comme le Saint-Esprit lui donnait de le faire. ⁵ Or, il y avait en séjour à Jérusalem des Juifs, hommes pieux, de toutes les nations qui sont sous le ciel. ⁶ Au bruit qui eut lieu, la multitude accourut, et elle fut confondue parce que chacun les entendait parler dans sa propre langue.

ACTS 2:1-18

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome,¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words.¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.