

Dream God's Dream

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Pentecost, May 24, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Acts 2:1-24](#)

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If you've been a regular church-goer for more than a half-dozen years, you've probably noticed that we read this same story from the second chapter of Acts every spring. Every year at Christmas, we read about birth of Jesus from Luke's gospel. Every year at Epiphany, we read about the Magi from Matthew's gospel.

There are plenty of stories to pick from for Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter; each gospel has something unique to say about Holy Week. But for each of these other big holy-days in the liturgical calendar – Christmas, Epiphany, and Pentecost – we have only one story to tell, and so we tell that one story each year.

Pentecost (from a Greek word for “fiftieth”) is the fiftieth and last day of the Easter season. Just as Maundy Thursday coincides with the Jewish festival of the Passover, Pentecost coincides with the Jewish festival of Shavuot. For the ancient Israelites, this festival was a harvest celebration. Over time, it came to mark the receiving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, which you might think of as “another kind of harvest and nourishment.”¹

The reason why Jews from all across the Mediterranean were in Jerusalem in our reading from Acts is that they were there to celebrate Shavuot. Jesus had promised the disciples that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit not long after his departure (we talked about that last week). Just as Jesus promised, on the festival day, the Holy Spirit arrives.

The scene is spectacular and chaotic: First, a violent, rushing sound like wind blows through the inside of the house, evoking images from the first to verses of the creation story in Genesis 1. Then “divided tongues, as of fire” come. It's not a fire that destroys. Rather, like the fire that Moses encountered at the bush that burned yet didn't consume, these tongues of fire filled the disciples with power and, I think, joy.

As one commentator put it, “The Spirit's immediate effect is linguistic: many are empowered ‘to speak in other languages,’ and at the same time, each person hears each testimony in their native tongue. Think of a meeting at the United Nations, in which everyone hears the proceedings through a headset, translated into their language. The people outside who've heard the noises and have gathered around the house are dazzled and bewildered. At least some of them seem to know that something significant is happening; they wonder, ‘What does this mean?’”²

¹ “Understand and Connect,” *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/25/understand-and-connect-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-pentecost> (posted 18 May 2026; accessed 20 May 2026).

² *Ibid.*

There's a wonderful little exchange where some people assume the disciples are drunk, and Peter replies with, "It's only 9:00 in the morning, and on Sundays we wait for brunch." More importantly, Peter gets up with the other disciples to explain what's going on. It's not clear to me if the crowd has come into the house uninvited or if the disciples are suddenly outside the house – though I think that detail doesn't matter. Peter cites the prophet Joel, adapting those ancient words to explain what's happening in that moment. The decisive chapter of history has arrived, he tells them. The dawn of God's joyous Jubilee that Jesus declared early in his ministry is happening now, empowered by the "pouring out" of the Holy Spirit upon "all flesh". Jesus both heralded and inaugurated this new era, and the Spirit is now empowering a community through whom the movement's message will go out to the ends of the earth. The church is born!

It seems to me that the birthday of the church is a perfect time to reflect on what "the church" is in the first place. This passage by itself doesn't say what the *mission* of the church is. For that, I think we need to look back to the gospel according to Luke and then forward though the book at Acts. The reason I'm picking Luke's gospel is that the author of Acts is the author of Luke, so to get a sense of what the author of Acts saw as the mission of the church, I think we should also consult that author's gospel.

And there is what I think this author things the mission of the church is: To bringing God's love into the world by bringing healing, liberation, justice, and joy into the world.

While the passage doesn't fully describe the mission of the church, it does give us a hint of what the church is like when it's carrying out that mission. First, today's reading paints a portrait of the church as a *dynamic community*. When people wonder what all the noise is about, Peter tells them about Jesus.

One of the hallmarks of this dynamic community is that it's made up of people following Jesus. Peter also says that the community is empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out God's creative mission. It is worth noting that the Holy Spirit comes on the individuals *while they are together*. I think it's significant that "the empowerment of the Holy Spirit took place only after the people were all together."³

Rev. Yvonne V. Delk points out that this empowerment is not just be for a privileged few. This empowerment is *for all*. It takes all of us together to be about building a community of faith, justice, healing, and joy.

Second, today's reading paints a portrait of the church as a *diverse, inclusive, and egalitarian community*. The Jews Peter addresses are from all over the known world (as "known" to Luke). Some of them probably live in Jerusalem. Others may be visiting. And in eight more chapters, the movement will open to include Gentiles as well. By quoting the prophet Joel, Peter casts the church as a spirited community of bridge-builders, visionaries, and dreamers. These visionary dreamers are male and female, so people of all genders. They are enslaved and free, so oppressed and powerful. They are young and old, so multigenerational. And before we get to the end of this chapter, we learn that they soon

³ Yvonne V. Delk, "Standing Together," Sojourners, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/standing-together> (accessed 24 May 2026).

leveled the economic playing field: “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”⁴

In other words, this community broke the barriers that stand in the way of love. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, they broke the barriers of language and nation. They’d already been at work breaking the barriers of gender and race. The early church worked hard at breaking the barriers of social class. I would argue that Jesus and the early church even sought to break the barriers of religion, though it’s hard for a religion to define itself and have no boundaries of religion. Put simply, the church sought to stand together on the side of love.

Delk points out, “Standing together in one place did not mean that all were singing the same song or even from the same page. The Pentecost experience revealed that each spoke in their own language, maintaining individual linguistic identities and selfhood. What is important to note here is that they were able to understand each other. This is a partnership model, built upon the recognition that others also know and must be heard. It calls into existence a community where the contributions, capacities, gifts, and talents of all are woven into collective effort.”⁵

Once every three years, the Pentecost story gets paired with the Tower of Babel story. The Pentecost story is often seen as a reversal of the Babel. But to be a reversal of the Babel story, everyone would need to end up speaking one language, and this doesn’t happen. Rather, I see in this story a holy reaffirmation of diversity of languages (and with that, a holy affirmation of diversity of cultures). What the Holy Spirit does is make diversity a gift, something that strengthens the community for fulfilling the mission. The disciples speak about the things that matter most and all understand. Rather than scattering in confusion, people of many cultures, speaking many languages gather close and listen together.⁶

What a contrast to how the nations of the world tend to treat one another. One of the commentaries I read this week pointed out that Pentecost was witnessed by the ancestors of people in several nations with which the United States has had tensions or open conflict. Judea itself is today’s Israel and Palestine. Mesopotamia is Iraq, a place where we’ve fought two wars. We’ve had a recent conflict in all of Libya, not just “the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene.” “Parthians, Medes, and Elamites” would now be Iranians.⁷

It’s difficult to imagine the geopolitical barriers that divide us today torn down and replaced by understanding. But it’s not impossible.

I wonder if the apostles were dreaming of that as tongues as of fire rested on each one. Though the risen Christ had told them they would receive power to become his witnesses to the ends of the earth, I don’t think they were fully convinced or prepared. I don’t think we are, either. So imagine for a moment. Dream for a moment. What if the Holy

⁴ See Acts 2:43-47.

⁵ Delk, *op. cit.*

⁶ Stephanie Paulsell, “Faith Matters,” *The Christian Century*, 11 May 2016 edition, page 57.

⁷ Celeste Kennel-Shank, “Embracing Enemies,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/embracing-enemies> (accessed 23 May 2026).

Spirit came upon us, revealing to us power we don't know we possess? Hand out the crash helmets and life jackets.

So often Christianity has reduced the cross and the Holy Spirit to introversion and exclusivity. It has become all about Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. And Jesus is so much more than that.

Even when we have been extroverted in our missionary activity, we have a history of holding onto the exclusivity. The Congregationalists (predecessors of the United Church of Christ) evangelized Hawaii and in the process forced Hawaiians to give up their culture. And then their descendants forced the Hawaiians to give up their sovereignty. No effort was made to empower the people they were evangelizing. What a contrast to the togetherness of Pentecost.

“Standing together in one place can be interpreted as people working together, speaking together, in order to understand and to be understood, and engaging in covenants for moving toward the city that God intends for all creation. This is truly the new space called forth by Jesus.”⁸

“Our young ones will see visions and our old ones will dream dreams,” Peter told the crowd that gathered. It makes me wonder: What are our visions? What are our dreams? And are they as big and bodacious as God's are?

The disciples were inside having this Holy Spirit party, and something attracted the attention of the people who were outside. Something drew those people from all kinds of cultures and languages together. It might have been the sound of a violent rush of wind shaking the building. More likely, I think, it was joy. A vision-induced, dream-producing joy. And so they started the work of bringing God's love into the world by bringing healing, liberation, justice, and joy into the world.

And they invited others to join in.

Amen.

⁸ Delk, *op. cit.*