

# SPIRIT PEOPLE

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

May 31, 2009

8:30 and 11:05 a.m. services

*(Pentecost Sunday)*



# ST. PAUL'S

## UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

## Acts 2:1-21

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"*

*All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"*

*But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."*

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"*

The day of Pentecost in Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus was a festival of weeks, as they called it. It was celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> day following the Passover, seven weeks plus one day. It later came to be a day to emphasize the Law of Moses for the

Jewish people. Indeed, a festival to celebrate the Law of Moses is still held five weeks following Passover in some Jewish congregations today.

In Biblical times, it was one of those days when Jews from all over would come to Jerusalem for the celebration. The many languages are referenced in our text from the reading in Acts 2 today. We of course emphasized the many voices during our own reading of the text today. On that day of Pentecost long ago, people experienced the presence of God as the Holy Spirit causing them to understand a common language in spite of their differences. Since that day, Pentecost has been celebrated in Christian worship each year, 50 days after Easter. In the liturgical calendar, there is Easter, then the Ascension 40 days after Easter and Pentecost 50 days after Easter, and finally then Trinity Sunday on the following Sunday, next Sunday. It is the way the liturgy of the church tries to affirm the basic truths about Jesus and the trinity.

Perhaps it has never been more timely to pray that the Holy Spirit allow the many voices to hear, in some sense at least, a common language. According to the *World Almanac*, in our world today, 873 million people speak Mandarin Chinese, 322 million speak Spanish, 309 million people speak English, 180 million speak Hindi, and 177 million speak Portuguese. Both literally and symbolically we live in a world that speaks many different languages. Never has that been more true here in Houston, Texas.

We are all reminded to ask the biblical question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Dr. Stephen Klineberg of Rice University has just published his 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Houston Area Survey. Dr. Klineberg is the sociology professor, who among other things collects attitudinal and demographic information about Houston and Harris County each year. Rice University has just announced a center in his honor to continue. He has spoken here at St. Paul’s. His findings are very revealing. In 40 years, he says, Houston has moved from a typical bi-racial southern city to one of the most ethnically diverse cities in America. Forty years ago, Harris County was about 75 percent white, 20 percent black, and not much else. Today, no single ethnic group is a majority, not only in Houston, but in all of Harris County. Today we are 36.6

percent white, 38.6 percent Hispanic, 18 percent black and 6.6 percent Asian and other. Our neighborhood is very diverse and speaks many languages.

Perhaps the most revealing statistic in Dr. Klineberg's research is this. In Harris County, Texas, almost 70 percent of the population over age 60 is Anglo. And today in Harris County, Texas, the Anglo population in the under-30 age range is less than 24 percent. Seventy-five percent-plus of our under-30 population is non-Anglo. We live in a changing world. However you feel about the issue of immigration, these statistics reveal the reality on the ground in Harris County, Texas.

To paraphrase our scripture reading just a bit, there are devout people from every nation under heaven living in Houston, Texas. What will it take for us to speak a language that everyone understands?

There are many other aspects to Dr. Klineberg's survey that will be challenging for us to find that common ground. For instance, in Harris County, about 40 percent believe that abortion is morally acceptable. Yet about 54 percent believe that it should be a legal and medical option. That is to say that most people oppose abortion, but think it should remain a legal and medically safe option in some cases. That of course is one area where it is difficult to find common ground.

When President Obama spoke at the graduation ceremonies at Catholic Notre Dame University, the issue took center stage. Our President's remarks did not please everyone, but many people gave him high marks both for not skirting the issue and at least trying to find some common ground. That issue in particular is one where common ground has been difficult to find.

On another complicated social and personal issue, Dr. Klineberg found more common ground and some shifts in perspective. In Harris County, Texas, 61 percent of those on the survey believe that homosexuality is a given, not a choice, up from 50 percent just nine years ago. That one shift in attitude has caused other shifts in attitudes on this subject toward generally more moderation and acceptance. Still, there are many different opinions within the religious community, our United Methodist Church and here at St. Paul's.

Where is the common ground?

Where is the influence of the spirit that allows people from various perspectives and backgrounds to hear a common language?

In our text today, it was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that brought about a common language. What will it take for the Holy Spirit to inspire us in such a way that we can speak a common language? Spirit people speak a language of love, the language everyone understands.

As you know, Quakers, the Society of Friends as they are sometimes called, worship in a very different way from most churches. Quakers often worship by sitting in silence. When Quakers gather for worship, the guideline is, “Let no one come prepared to speak.” And, “Let no one come prepared not to speak.” You are to end the silence only when inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever been in a gathering where silence would have been better than speech because the speech was not Spirit-filled? Or, have you ever been in a gathering of either silence or noise that longed for Spirit-filled speech, or some word that reflected the love of God? Spirit-filled people speak a language that everyone understands; it is a language of love. Spirit people also know when to be silent. Sometimes the silence is to listen to God. Sometimes it is to listen to another person.

Maybe the real miracle of Pentecost was a miracle of hearing. People listened and therefore heard a common language. Spirit people know when to listen and when to speak.

We recently bypassed a significant day in Methodist history. I speak of Aldersgate Day, May 24. Aldersgate Day refers to a time in the life of John Wesley, the Founder of our United Methodist Church. Wesley left an Evensong service in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London and went to a prayer service in a little meeting room on Aldersgate Street. The last time I was in London, I retraced Wesley’s steps and walked myself from St. Paul’s to the site on Aldersgate Street. It is quite a long walk by our standards today. The building is no longer there, but a little garden and a plaque mark the spot. It was at that spot at a quarter to nine in the evening as Wesley wrote in his journal on May 25, 1738, that he felt his heart strangely warmed and

it changed his life. When Methodists speak of a heartwarming experience, they perhaps unknowingly today reference the experience of Wesley.

Wilson Boots of our congregation says his father's boyhood church had a clock in the sanctuary that was always set at a quarter 'til nine, so prominent was the story in early Methodism. We could use some more warm hearts in today's world where the Holy Spirit gives us tongues to speak and ears to hear. Spirit people speak and hear a common language in a diverse world. It is the language of love.

On this Pentecost Sunday, will you be open to the Spirit and speak and listen with a warm heart in our very diverse and complicated world?