

“Shibboleth”

for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

Genesis 1, Acts 2

08 June 2025, Pentecost

*Hear once again the story of the church’s creation, from Acts 2:1-21:*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** 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. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

**5** Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, 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, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” **13** But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

**14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews[a] and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

**17** ‘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.

**18** Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,  
and they shall prophesy.

....

**21** Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

*This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.*

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There are two ways to figure out if someone is from Due West, South Carolina. The first is simple: they are no longer *in* Due West, South Carolina. For a town of 1,216, Due West

seems to have produced ex-pats at a stunning rate. The second relies on very specific local knowledge. When speaking of the family that owns the farm on your right when you come into town, the one that has, for generations, operated Due West Supply, a hardware store, community gathering space, feed and seed, and my playground in the 1980s and 1990s, one recalls with fondness or bemusement the *MacDills*.

Now why would that be a tell? Because my mother's family, on paper, are the McDills. "Mc" like McDonald's, Dill like a pickle. But to the good folks in Due West, we are the *MacDills*. "Mac" like MacBeth, "Dill" still a pickle.

*MacDill* is a shibboleth, one of those particular words that marks the space between an insider and outsider. Those who know, know the proper pronunciation, everyone else is on the outs. Shibboleths exist in almost language, including Greenvillager. Consider the street just down the road, the one that runs between McDaniel and Cleveland, parallel to Victory and Crescent: it reads like McIver. But you who've been here a while, you know what road that is...

Say it with me:

*McKeeever*. Tell us you're a yankee without telling us you're a yankee: you are strolling down McIver street. Tell us you're from Greenville: you're seeing a show at the Bi-Lo Center. If you grew up in Columbia, it's Huger and Gervais, and don't even get me started on Charleston, where every street has at least two more syllables and 3-5 silent letters. Order a "sub" for lunch instead of a *hoagie* in my wife's New Jersey home and you will be asked to leave.

Language is a boundary. The markers of inclusion in one group are lines of division for those outside of the linguistic boundary.

*McKeeever* is all fun and games, but the flip side of language bringing folks together is *separation*. There is a reason "don't say gay" bills have gained traction in some places: by refusing to acknowledge a certain population, bill authors hope to squash identities, to form a people in *their* image. Likewise, by demanding that English be the "official" language of the realm, those who are not fluent are made to feel other.

We may think of the miracle at Pentecost as a one-time moment of chaos and beauty, with folks speaking in foreign tongues with their heads alight, but there is something else going on in Luke's story.

Something that goes all the way back,  
back to the word at the beginning.

In *The Harbinger* cover this week, Blake reflected on the incomprehensibility of creation. What has been revealed to us as truth is also utterly beyond our understanding, a thought we can barely think. From nothing, God created us, beings different from God and from one another. God did not *need* to create the world, there

was no *lack* in God. God created because God is gracious and willed to share a good world.

God acted in freedom and brought about something utterly new. Which, as it turns out, is the story of Scripture. God calls Abraham and in so doing creates a people. The Father raises the Son from the dark deep of the tomb, an act of creation whose only precedent is *the creation*. And then, from nothing, unasked for, in the midst of political tumult and personal fear, the Spirit creates the people that will become the church.

How?

God turns to the tongues of fire and the tongues of men. But this flame does not destroy, and this tongue does not divide.

Listen to the story once more: the apostles, “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages...” and the crowd, which Luke goes to pains to depict as ethnically divided, linguistically divided, and politically divided, from East and West (Africa, Europe, and Asia), of all genders, hears “them speaking in the native language of each.”

Pentecost, as Willie James Jennings reminds us, is first and foremost a miracle of hearing and of language, and is as such a miracle of boundary-breaking *free* grace, the grace of watery chaos and darkened tombs, the grace that speaks of undeserved, incomprehensible beginnings.

Those of you who know the first creation story know it unfolds in diversity. God creates all manner of flotsam and jetsam, forms people who are different, makes birds and elephants, and this giraffe over here, unspools a rainbow of color and a world of biodiversity.

God wills and rejoices in newness and difference, an unasked for grace reinforced at Pentecost.

Indeed, when God calls the church from each corner of the world it is in celebration of *difference*. God does not require that the gospel be heard in *only* Aramaic or Greek, that it be heard exclusively among the Jews, or the people of the Mediterranean. God does not tell God’s story only in the King James or make the Word available only to the elite of Rome. God gives a Word to each according to the unique political, economic, social, linguistic, and gender identity of each, and in so doing God honors the difference that from the beginning has marked the divine will.

Through the languages of the world, God makes a people united not by a king, region, or system, but by a story.

A story that draws together and creates.  
A word greater than all our shibboleths.

At Pentecost, God pours out the Spirit on *all flesh*. When God creates the church, God reminds us, once again, that nothing that we are is a barrier to the divine presence.

*All flesh*, each one, hears the word  
and the Word, the story, the barometer by which we live and move and have our being,  
is Jesus Christ.

The language is different but the story is the same.

The cacophony of Pentecost  
which sounds strangely synchronous  
is the sound of the people of God at work and witness  
a creative sound, that forms rather than excluding  
that welcomes rather than destroying  
that utilizes our peculiarities to spread the good news,  
that forms a people, and in so doing builds a Kingdom.

The story of God that culminates in the creation of the church is not about what waits for us at the end. It is about the living Spirit in the present, the God who molds us into that which we were first called to be (creatures in service). Pentecost is a retelling of creation, of God making a people.

Which also means it is suffused with chaos. Like the onlookers at Pentecost who assumed the Spirit was one of Dionysian drunkenness, the world that holds tight to its boundaries and shibboleths will not always welcome the good news. Then and now, the Spirit drives change, and change, in the world this side of Eden, is often perceived of as a threat.

Aware that change has the potential to unleash chaos, famed leadership gurus Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky theorized that people do not fear change itself, but rather the *loss* that accompanies change.

What happens if English is not the official language of the States? What might we lose? Does Greenville lose its distinctiveness with each new apartment complex of folks who will never know the Bi-Lo Center? Does marriage fall apart if its scope is expanded? If we acknowledge the sins of our nation does the whole experiment fail?

It's a variation on the same question: what will we have to give up when the Spirit of God turns us away from the boundaries and shibboleths we worship and turns us toward Jesus Christ?

We may scoff at the question but if we truly believe that the Spirit of the beginning, the Spirit of the empty tomb and the tongues of fire, is among us, we have to acknowledge that even now we are being transformed, created as a wild wonder of a community into disciples of the living God.

We are being asked to hear the story and to respond, not by flattening what makes us unique — our language, peculiarities, race, gender, or sexuality — but by living a life in singular pursuit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the one who was on the road welcoming and dining and healing and proclaiming and even then drawing a wide welcome around an inaugural story.

For the first Christians the blowing winds of the Spirit required transformation of the rituals and identifiers that had defined their faithfulness for generations. For the Gentiles, the sweeping call of the Spirit meant letting go of the gods of economy and empire in favor of the Jewish God. For both, embracing the Spirit meant loss.

As it has for this church. In February 1954, weeks before the *Brown v. Board* ruling was announced, the Diaconate of Westminster voted that anyone, regardless of race, should be seated for worship. They made a baby-step, albeit delayed, toward desegregation. The minutes of the ruling body reflect the distress of some members. Having discerned the movement of the Spirit, the caretakers of this congregation nevertheless worried what change would bring. After all, many white churchgoers in this region clung tightly to separation, turning to the church for justification. The Synod of South Carolina, voted in September of 1954 to continue the practice of segregation for the “best interest of harmonious relations” in Presbyterian institutions.

Facing the horrors of Jim Crow segregation, and aware that in so doing they were losing a way of existing in the world, the Diaconate nonetheless discerned the blowing winds of the Spirit. They knew the church would have to *change*.

Seven years later, when Westminster was laboring to build this sanctuary, the question of segregation crept up again. Tensions in the city were high. And again the Diaconate, this time with a second from the Session, resolved to seat anyone who came to worship at the new Sanctuary on the side of Augusta Road.

The winds of the Spirit blew. In order to follow, our congregation had to confront the reality of sinfulness, and the ways they had been formed in spite of the will of God. They had risk rejection and loss in order to witness to the burning flame of the Spirit in a time of deep regional darkness.

The church lost members. Some congregants openly protested, as they would again when we ordained a woman to serve on our Session and, later, to serve as our associate pastor. But that wasn't the end. The Spirit was still calling and the church still discerning, separating the good news from the rancorous, alluring call of a culture bent on its Shibboleths. We again *lost* members when we made clear our intentions to welcome and call to leadership individuals and families who identified as LGBTQIA+.

For Westminster, the Pentecostal winds of the Spirit have led to loss. But, critically, then as now, the loss of the dividing wall has been in service to a greater creation, inaugurated at *the beginning*, confirmed in the resurrection, and gifted to all flesh at Pentecost.

The Spirit has made us a people. The Gospel has formed us despite our fear. The Story has brought us through history and to this moment where once again the Spirit calls, a formative question hanging in the air:

What is God next calling us to?  
Where are we being asked to change?

In whatever dialect you dream tell me this: what is the Story, Jesus Christ, asking you to bear into the world? Because I'll tell you, there are folks in our world, our community, heck even these pews, in desperate need of your translation.

The Story beckons across every divide. It is a story of judgment for those who would stand in its way but one of welcome for those willing to hear. It is greater than every other claim, every other flag, and every other kingdom. The story is the good news of Jesus Christ *for all people*, meant to be poured out on *all flesh*. It is the re-creation of the world, a joining together amidst all our difference. It is ours. All of us *together* ... trust me when I tell you, we are not going at this alone.

The Story binds us together as a church across time and place, and together — in view of our odd, beautiful, myriad differences — it binds us to God. It is ours to tell that story, to bear it into our worlds, speak it over the cacophony of our own present empire, and in so doing participate we in the Kingdom whose door is open wide, and whose name is mercy,  
forgiveness,  
grace,  
freedom,  
and justice,

all under the banner of Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected God, whose Spirit is at work creating peace amidst chaos, defeating death, and pouring out goodness wherever there are ears to hear.

God will use you.  
The question now is whether you are willing to hear that call, to face loss, and in so doing to inherit, along with this great, wide world, the Kingdom of God.

Leigh Stuckey, "Shibboleth"  
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