

Pentecost

May 24, 2026

When I was coming up in seminary, there was a trend among preachers to localize the Pentecost story we heard today from the Acts of the Apostles. Instead of “Parthians, Medes, Elamites,” pastors would swap in local place names: Hobart, Pulaski, Ashwaubenon, Allouez. The idea was to make the story feel closer to home.

And maybe it did. But I’m not sure it helped us understand why Pentecost actually matters. Because Pentecost is not just a story about many places. It’s a story about difference, about diversity, about what God does when human beings are divided from one another.

And to really understand Pentecost, we have to hold it beside the other scripture we heard today: the story of the Tower of Babel from Genesis. Now more often than not, Babel gets preached as a story about human pride, about people trying to play God by building a tower to heaven. And there’s an important message there.

But there’s another detail in the story we often overlook. Genesis says, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” One language. One set of words. One way of speaking. One way of seeing the world.

Genesis tells us the people said, “Let us build ourselves a city... otherwise we shall be scattered across the face of the whole earth.” In other words, sameness equals safety. Difference feels dangerous.

So they gather everybody into one project, one culture, one identity, one way of being human. And God disrupts it. Not because diversity is a punishment. No! In fact it’s the exact opposite. Diversity is God’s dream. Babel is not the story of God cursing humanity with difference. It is the story of God saving humanity from uniformity. God refuses to let human beings collapse into a fearful sameness where everybody must speak alike, think alike, act alike, and belong alike.

When these two pieces of scripture are proclaimed together, Pentecost is often framed as Babel in reverse. But I think we need to push back on that, too.

In Acts, the miracle is not that everybody suddenly speaks the same language again. The miracle is that each person hears the good news in their own language. Difference remains. Distinctiveness remains. Culture remains. Identity remains. The Spirit does not erase diversity. Rather, the Spirit speaks through it.

And that matters deeply for us today. Because we still live in a world terrified of difference. We still build towers. Not literal brick towers, maybe, but social towers, political towers, economic towers, cultural towers, systems designed to protect the comfort and power of some people at the expense of others.

And one of the tallest towers we have built in this country is racism. Now anytime racism comes up, people become immediately anxious. Defensive. Uncomfortable.

A long time ago, in a place far, far away, I heard of someone leaving a church because of how that church was speaking about racism. The person took offense at the implication that they were racist.

I didn't understand it at first, but the more I thought about it, I realized their reaction stemmed from the fact that many of us were taught to think about racism almost entirely as an individual moral failing. We were taught that racism equals hatred, cruelty, slurs, intentional prejudice. So, if we are nice people...good people...church people... then surely racism must be about somebody else.

But writer and historian Ibram Kendi reframes the conversation in a really important way. He writes, "The opposite of racist is not 'not racist.' It is antiracist." In other words, there is no neutral ground. Because racism is not just about individual intentions. It is about systems, structures, policies, habits, assumptions, and outcomes. Kendi argues that policies and systems either reinforce racial inequity or reduce racial inequity. They either widen injustice or help dismantle it. And one reason his work resonates with so many people is because it moves the conversation away from "Am I a good person?" and toward, "What kind of world are we helping create?"

That is a Pentecost question. Because Pentecost asks whether we can hear the image of God speaking through voices different from our own, whether we can honor human dignity without demanding sameness, whether we can become a community where difference is not merely tolerated, but celebrated as sacred?

The crowd at Pentecost is astonished because they hear their own languages spoken, languages that were often marginalized, overlooked, dismissed. And in Pentecost, the Spirit says no language is beneath God, no culture is beyond God, no people are excluded from God's vision of beloved community.

Now, the church has not always lived this out well. Too often Christianity has been used as a tool of assimilation, a demand that people erase parts of themselves in order to belong. Think of indigenous children forced into boarding schools, Black churches burned, immigrants mocked for their accents, European images of Jesus presented as universal while other images were ignored or rejected. Colonialism writ large and the Doctrine of Discovery. Again and again, the church has sometimes acted less like Pentecost and more like Babel, demanding conformity instead of celebrating diversity.

But Pentecost calls us to a new and better way. Not colorblindness. Not pretending difference doesn't exist. Not "I don't see race." Because if God delights in diversity, then refusing to see difference is not holiness. It's avoidance.

Rather, Pentecost invites us to actually see one another, to listen deeply to experiences different from our own, to learn histories we were never taught, to notice systems that advantage some while burdening others.

And yes, that can feel uncomfortable. But discomfort is not the same thing as harm. Growth is uncomfortable. Transformation is uncomfortable. Pentecost itself was uncomfortable. There was wind and fire and chaos and confusion.

And some people in the crowd looked at the disciples and said, “They are filled with new wine.” Which is ancient biblical language for, “These people are drunk out of their minds.”

But the truth of the matter is that Spirit-filled communities often look strange to the world. To many, communities where people cross boundaries, share power, tell hard truths, practice repentance, and choose solidarity over silence are suspect.

Communities where people do more than simply claim they are “not racist,” but actively participate in the work of anti-racism are suspect. But anti-racism is not about shame. It is not about self-hatred. It is not about walking around endlessly apologizing for existing. It is about love. Love large enough to ask hard questions. Love brave enough to confront injustice. Love honest enough to recognize that we all inherit systems we did not create but are still responsible for shaping.

The good news of Pentecost is that the Spirit is still moving, still disrupting towers, still breaking open narrow imaginations, still teaching us new languages of compassion and justice, still reminding us that unity does not require uniformity.

In fact, Christian unity is not achieved by erasing our differences. It is achieved by learning how to belong to one another through them.

And maybe that is the miracle we most need right now. Not that everybody becomes the same, but that people radically different from one another discover they are still capable of becoming community.

So, on this Memorial Day weekend, as our nation honors those who died while serving this melting pot, may we, as both citizens and disciples, commit ourselves to being a community where every language matters, every story matters, every life matters, a community where diversity is not a threat to overcome but a gift through which the Spirit speaks.

That is Pentecost. And thanks be to God, the fire is still burning.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-15
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