

# SUNDAY

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by Eric H. F. Law

**P**lace a bible and lighted candle at the center of your group. Collect and surround the bible with current headlines that report breakdowns and challenges in communication among the peoples of our world.

**LEADER:** Come, Holy Spirit, come, befriender of the poor, source of all our store.

**ALL: Holy Spirit, Creator God, shower us with your love.**

**LEADER:** Heal our wounds, our strength renew; on our dryness pour your dew; wash stains of guilt or shame away!

**ALL: Holy Spirit, Creator God, shower us with your love.**

**A**rriving in the United States at age 14 as an immigrant from Hong Kong, I struggled for many years to learn to communicate in a language other than my native tongue. Every year on Pentecost Sunday I heard how the Holy Spirit filled the followers of Jesus, who then began to speak in other languages.

I longed for this miracle of the tongue for myself—if only communicating across the language barrier were that easy, if only the Holy Spirit didn't need to work through me. The harder I tried, the more nervous I became, and the less effective I was as a communicator.

I grew up in a family and in a culture that did not encourage



young people to speak but rather valued as good the young person who listened and did not boast. In the United States, I found myself living in a society that fixates on our ability to speak. Participation in a classroom means speaking. A good leader is equated with a good speaker. A good pastor needs to be a good preacher.

Therefore, a person whose cultural upbringing does not focus on the ability to speak appears weak. Many perceive a person who does not speak English well as unintelligent. My inability to speak proper English made invisible and irrelevant all that was inside me—my thoughts, my creativity, and my experience.

While I was struggling to pronounce the English language correctly and write it properly, I lost sight of how the Pentecost experience might help me when people treated me as inferior, sometimes thought I was stupid, and judged that I had nothing to contribute to what was going on. I was too caught up with the “speaking” part of the Pentecost event to recognize it also involves listening.

Effective communication requires both speaking and listening. If someone is speaking and no one is listening, no communication happens. Jesus challenges us, “Let those who have ears, listen.”

All through high school, except for two teachers, very few English-speaking people bothered to listen to who I was and what I could offer. Even fewer valued the gift I had for listening that my upbringing had imparted to me.

● **What is a personal experience in which you accomplished meaningful communication with another? Were you more a speaker or listener in that event?**

## The Spirit empowers Jesus' disciples to speak.

*As you read aloud the Pentecost story, I invite you to listen with this question in mind: Is Pentecost a miracle of the tongue or the ear?*

### Jesus sends his Spirit.

The day of Pentecost found the men and women who believed in Jesus all together in one place. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind. 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 all heard them speaking in their native languages. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

"Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

Acts 2.1-11

Thinking about whether Pentecost is a miracle of the tongue or ear helps us hear the importance of listening in the story. A technique called "power" analysis can also help us.

Power analysis, as I use it here, is nothing more than identifying who has power and who is powerless in the social, political, and economic context of the event. This analysis sheds light not only on what the holy scriptures record but also on the dynamics of communication in our faith and civic communities.

In the Pentecost event, the disciples of Jesus are the powerless ones. As Jews who believe Jesus is the messiah, they are part of a very small minority among their people. They believe Jesus' death and resurrection signifies that he is the one God has sent to bring salvation to all. To the Romans, Jesus' followers are just another Jewish sect whose leader has been executed and whose followers should be in hiding for fear of further persecution.

However, in their seemingly powerless state, the Holy Spirit inspires the powerless to see that they are blessed in their weakness. In that blessedness they find strength to speak out and proclaim the mighty works of God. The Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' disciples to speak in tongues and later to preach with authority in public



places. In the Pentecost story the powerless experience the *miracle of the tongue*.

The "devout Jews from every nation who dwell in Jerusalem" are the powerful ones in the Pentecost story. They are the majority that do not yet believe Jesus is the messiah. If they want, they can hand the disciples over to the officials to be persecuted. These powerful ones experience the *miracle of the ear*.

The Holy Spirit challenges these devout Jews to listen even though what the disciples say is in another language. They are in a receiving mode. Some do not understand but think Jesus' disciples are drunk. But others are amazed.

The miracle of the ear for the powerful works together with the miracle of the tongue for the powerless. Both miracles are essential to make the Pentecost experience complete.

- What difference does it make to think of the coming of the Holy Spirit as a miracle of both the tongue and ear?
- When have you experienced the coming of the Spirit in your life?

If the church is to move toward Pentecost in the world, it must work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit to make the miracle of the tongue and the miracle of the ear happen between the powerful and powerless in our communities. This implies a bridge-building strategy that requires two different approaches, one starting from each bank of the river.

On one side, the church needs to teach the powerful to listen. The church needs to encourage those who are perceived as powerful to practice the spirituality of choosing the cross. The instinct for the powerful is to act, control, and command.

The church should challenge the powerful to go against that instinct. The church should invite them to get out of the “doing” mode and enter into a “being” mode of listening. The gospel challenges them to give up and redistribute their power to the powerless.

On the other side the church needs to encourage the powerless to gather in communities of their choosing. In these communities of faith, they can find their identity and strength just as the powerless disciples gathered together before the Pentecost event. Then, the church needs to give them a platform to address the whole church.

If the church is to respond to the yearning of the Holy Spirit, it should move toward supporting the communities of the powerless to come forth and exercise the miracle of the tongue and speak

of the mighty works of God. Remember that the powerless and the weak are blessed. It is through their shared faith that they find power to endure and to speak the truth.

I have created a communication process that can help us get closer to achieving Pentecost in our group sharing. The following paragraph describes this process I call Mutual Invitation.

*In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we proceed in the following way: The leader or a designated person shares first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. The person invited does not need to be the next person in the circle. After the second person has spoken, he or she has the privilege of inviting another to share. Anyone who doesn't want to speak can simply say “pass” and invite another to share. Anyone who is not ready to speak but will have something to share later can say, “I pass for now,” and proceed to invite another to share. The group continues to do this until everyone has been invited to speak.*

Using the Mutual Invitation process, invite each person in the group to share his or her reflection on these questions:

● **Who are the powerful in our community? How can we enable the powerful to respond to the challenge of the Holy Spirit to exercise the miracle of the ear?**

● **Who are the powerless in our community? How can we enable them to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to exercise the miracle of the tongue?**

For the powerless—those who find it hard to speak up in a group—using the Mutual Invitation process will guarantee that they will be invited to speak. Once they are invited they can choose to use that time any way they want. They can take time to be silent and put their thoughts together before they speak; they will not be interrupted. If they decide that they are not ready to speak, they can pass, knowing that there will be another time when they will be invited to speak.

Once they finish sharing, they then give up their power and invite someone else to share. This gesture of inviting someone, in itself, is empowering in that the inviters are given the privilege to redirect the process of sharing.

Mutual Invitation, if practiced consistently by a group, challenges the assumed power held by the different groups in a system. The process, and any other processes that enable the powerful to listen and the powerless to speak, becomes a visible sign of the Holy Spirit. We can use these skills to facilitate Pentecost not just during the Pentecost season but in our everyday ministry.

● **How might the Mutual Invitation process benefit the problems you see in news headlines?**

● **How can you use Mutual Invitation in your everyday ministry or work?**

# GOSPEL

## Jesus brings power and peace.

**NARRATOR:** It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them.

**JESUS:** Peace be with you.

**NARRATOR:** After this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

**JESUS:** Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

**NARRATOR:** Then he breathed on them and said:

**JESUS:** Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

John 20.19-23



## The Spirit affects our power dynamics.

**W**e today who proclaim the resurrection of Christ may feel powerless and insignificant in a world full of powerful forces pushing and pulling us here and there, to and fro—to war, to the accumulation of wealth, and political power. We may feel that our voices are insignificant, that nobody is listening to us.

However, Christ breathed on each one of us in our baptism. Each time we receive Holy Communion, we renew our acceptance of the responsibility that Christ empowers us to do. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The risen Christ sends us out into the world, empowers us with the Holy Spirit, and calls us to use our power according to his way and not the world’s. We must take this power we receive very seriously

because if we forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, and if we retain the sins of any, they are retained. How then shall we use this power?

The Pentecost event points the way. We are to listen and let go of control when we are powerful. We are to speak and act when we are powerless. Equally important is our challenge to intervene against injustice: we are to find ways for the Holy Spirit to empower those who are oppressed and powerless to speak the truth and to challenge those who are powerful to be silent and listen.

● **How can you move the people in your work, your family, or your ministry toward Pentecost?**

# PRAY

Pray the following verses of the Pentecost Sequence.

**LEADER:** Bend stubborn hearts and wills; melt what is frozen; warm what is chilled. Guide steps that go astray!

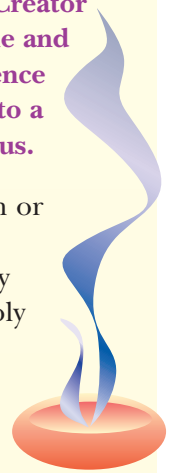
**ALL:** Holy Spirit, Creator God, shower us with your love.

**LEADER:** On all, in your sevenfold gifts, come! Give us life and guide our way! Bring us to your saving day!

**ALL:** Holy Spirit, Creator God, help us name and speak our experience of you. Open us to a Pentecost among us.

**LEADER:** To whom or where do we wish to send the energy and fire of the Holy Spirit?

*Let us speak these names and places aloud.*



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