

“MIRACLE ON 5 OAK STREET”

Acts 2:1-21

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

The disciples have stepped into the public square with an extraordinary, new message. To everyone's stunned surprise, they're relaying this message across a range of language barriers. People from all around the world are astonished to discover they can understand "these Galileans." This doesn't necessarily mean the disciples have become multi-lingual. There are only 12 disciples, while the list of Jews from every nation far outnumbers them. Rather, the soundwaves between the disciples' mouths and the people's ears seem to be undergoing some kind of miraculous transformation. Somehow, the Spirit is transfiguring the disciples' words before they land on their hearers' eardrums. As the crowd says, "If these men speaking are Galileans, how are we hearing their words in our own language?" The short answer is, "It's a miracle."

We have high standards for miracles. I imagine that, for most of us, the main criterion for calling something a miracle is that it must be a spectacular, supernatural event. Moses drives his staff into the surf of the Red Sea, the winds swoop down and drive the waters apart, creating a path of dry land. *Miracle*. Or the widow's son dies, but Elisha covers the child with his own body to warm it, and the child's life comes back to him, and the child sneezes seven times and opens his eyes. *Miracle*. Jesus saves a wedding reception by transforming large cisterns of water into vintage Bordeaux. He restores a man's sight with a topical mud solution. He strolls across the Sea of Galilee. *Miraculous*. Like today, when a supernatural sound like the rush of a tornado to fills a room, and dancing flames appear on the disciples' heads, we're experiencing a miracle-in-progress. But we shouldn't be too caught up in the spectacle of these things. There's much more to miracles than their supposed supernatural elements. Sometimes, the most powerful miracles are the most unassuming ones. Today, *part of the miracle is that people who previously couldn't understand one another discover to their amazement that they can.*

Remember the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. Early in humanity's history with God, "the whole earth had one language and the same words..." (Gen. 11:1ff.). Because there were no language barriers, and they were all using the metric system, there was nothing holding them back from building a tower enough to reach heaven. But the LORD said, "This is too much too soon!" So, the LORD went down there and confused their language, so that they couldn't understand one another's speech. You can imagine it put a quick end to things when the land owner was speaking Spanish, and the contractor Farsi, and the plumbers Mandarin, and the electricians English, and the preachers—God help 'em—woke up that day speaking Latin. The LORD scattered them all over the earth. The confusion of those differences was overwhelming.

But this Day of Pentecost, we see the Tower of Babel story reversed and turned upside down. The Spirit of God has been poured out on everyone. Now we have the miraculous ability to understand one another in ways we couldn't before. And that's amazing, considering the folks standing in the town square today. After all, the Parthians are here, and you know Parthians. For

the past year, the Parthians haven't been too keen on all this Discernment Team stuff, and their threefold charge. Just what in the world's going on around here anyhow? Don't they know what the Bible says? Then there are the Elamites, but they don't know what all this fuss is about. They were rather surprised to know the Parthians had so many concerns. Why do we have to be so judgmental? Can't we all live and let live? Can't everyone agree that love is love? All means all? Then there are the Cappadocians and the Pamphylians, who wish we could just let sleeping dogs lie, and if it ain't broke it don't need fixin', and why go stirring things up, and I thought we were welcoming already. Can't we all just get along? But there's also a rather sizable group of Medes, who were initially suspicious of everything the disciples said, but over time, engaged the process, studied Scripture, read books, talked to friends and family and even strangers, and learned to see and hear some things in new ways. And then, of course, there are the Cretans. But, thankfully, we don't have many Cretans around here.

Now, here all of us are, gathered and preparing to proclaim our consensus statement. This consensus statement comes in the form of a liturgy because liturgy means "work of the people," and this language has been crafted by the work of the people. What arose out of congregation-wide conversations was a common hope that we, the First Baptist Church of Asheville, would clarify our vision to welcome and include all people. We appointed a Discernment Team to guide our congregation in a biblical process of discernment leading to consensus. The crucial part of this process was making sure everyone had plenty of room and time to speak their mind and heart on some of the most divisive issues the global church has handled in all of its history. This is the New Testament way. The early Church governed itself through gatherings, by proclamations, arguments, testing ideas, searching the Scriptures, praying, and seeking general agreement. St. Paul called on the churches to let prophets speak, and let everyone "weigh what is said" (1 Cor. 14:29). A consensus meant—and still means—not that everyone agrees on every point, but, rather, what "seem[s] good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

To say this as clearly as I can, we are not voting today. There will be no secret ballot. Why? Because Christians don't keep secrets. Jesus said whatever is whispered in the backrooms will be shouted from the rooftops (Lk. 12:3). So, there will be no secrets in this house of prayer.

We will also not vote by "yeas" or "nays." Why? Because, first, questions about welcome and inclusion have become so complicated and divisive for the global church, splitting church upon church, denomination upon denomination, that turning to *Roberts Rules of Order* to sort this out would be like trying to wrestle a blue marlin with a \$20 Zebco fishing rod. Robert isn't that good of a fisherman. We need Jesus, and Paul, and the early Church's wisdom for this one.

Second, voting would create solid lines of division. There would be winners and losers in trying to replace the simple policy we currently have, which already states that all members are permitted to participate in all ordinances of the church. We shouldn't engrave new lines when we can write in the sand, and let the baptismal waters wash over our words as the tides of our fellowship ebb and flow.

And a third reason we are not going to vote is because voting excludes the possibility of continued dissent. Dissent means disagreement. Maybe you've read the consensus statement and still count yourself a dissenter. I want you to know your ideas matter, you're just as

welcome here, and you're just as much a part of the church as anyone else. You're just as much a part of the Body of Christ as anyone else here with whom you disagree. And you're just as loved and appreciated as you were before. While you may hold a different view on inclusion, you likely hold majority views on other crucial matters, like the vital importance of our congregational worship, our ministries to homeless and poor people, to those in prison, or to those with special needs, or to the Academy for the Arts, or the Children's After-School Program, and a holy host of other wonderful missions and ministries.

If, then, you're also included, why not register your continuing dissent as a genuine expression of faith? What's to prevent you from stepping into Gamaliel's shoes? Remember, Gamaliel, a respected leader and Pharisee, challenged the council not to imprison the apostles, and called on the community to let the apostles be. "If [their message] is of human origin," he said, "it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. In this case, you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:34-39). Can you be a 'Gamaliel' among us?

We articulate our views with particular languages, which we've learned since childhood, from our parents, from the Scriptures, from Church tradition, and from life experience. This Pentecost Sunday, we may still hear the gospel from people who speak a different language than us. Nevertheless, we can *understand* others, even when we disagree—and even when we profoundly disagree. And inasmuch as we can understand others and remain in fellowship, we are helping constitute a Pentecost miracle at 5 Oak Street. So, then, what is to prevent any of us from being part of this miracle? Is it a worldly thing to remain in fellowship with one another? Or is it worldly to mirror the divisions that continue to pockmark our culture? Stay. Stay, and dissent. Or, stay, and agree. But stay, and our staying faith will be reckoned to us as righteousness.

Our church spent the most significant amount of energy during this discernment process deliberating over questions about marriage. If anyone drew a line in the sand, it was most likely over this. Will we, or won't we, be a church that says yes if our same-sex members were to ask a minister to bless their marriage? After all the listening sessions, the Bible studies, the parking lot conversations, the Discernment Team's deliberations, and over 60 pages of notes detailing people's views, the Team was able to craft a message that seems good to the Spirit and to us.

Here, again, I want to be especially clear. Though we are clarifying today that our ministers may, if asked, choose to preside over a same-sex marriage, I hope what everyone will be able to recognize is how seriously we've all taken marriage, despite our divergent views about what that looks like:

Therefore, from now on, whether members getting married are straight or gay, our common conviction is that the purpose of any marriage is to model Christ's love for the church. Let every marriage be for the building up of the church. Let every marriage be the beginning of a particular, flourishing ecology of faith and friendship. Let every marriage here be a promise of new creation for the whole church. Let every marriage here mark the sacred beginning of a new family for the purposes of bearing or welcoming children, sharing one another's burdens, building a home for sharing good food and simple pleasures, and a haven for neighbors, guests, strangers, and even enemies. Let every marriage here be holy, sanctified, nurtured, and preserved. Let every marriage here help all members of the church—whether single

or married—to shine like stars in the world. And whenever we find that a marriage among us has broken, let us tend to the dear couple with wisdom, compassion, and tenderness. Let the First Baptist Church of Asheville be known far and wide for our high marriage standards, and for how we strengthen our marriage bonds. May the watching world see in us the anticipation of Revelation’s vision of a consummation of a new heaven and a new earth for all eternity. That’s who we’ve been. That’s who we are. And that’s who we will be.

One more thing about marriage, and it is significant. Jesus says that in the resurrection, we will neither marry nor be given in marriage (Mk. 12:25). This leads me to believe that, as sacred as marriage is in this life, marriage as we know it will not be the defining reality for the saints gathered around the throne. Why, then, would any of us break fellowship with our church over disagreements about an institution, that, according to Jesus, himself, isn’t going to exist in heaven?

Now to those among us who identify as LGBTQ—our brave members and friends near and far:

Breathe in the Spirit deeply, now.

Yes, you were and are and always will be welcome here...to build a life, nurture friendships, and be transformed by the renewing of your minds. To get married. To be ordained, if called and found qualified. To teach the Bible. To serve and to lead. To rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep.

May you exhale with joy and relief on this holy day, and know without an inkling of doubt that you are a beloved child of God, made in the image of God, destined to be with God forever.

Know that you, too, have been made into proclaimers of God’s power, wonders, and signs. You are disciples among disciples and priests among priests, that we may be priests to one another. We do need your help, and the spirit of grace you bring.

On this Day of Pentecost, let it be known that, “In these last days it will be,” God declares, “that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and *you*, [too] shall see visions, dream dreams, and you will prophesy” (Acts 2:17ff.).

To you, Asheville, our dear City, the language we speak, we speak that you may also understand. Do you hear the sound of a rushing wind? Won’t you catch this Pentecost Spirit? If you have been waiting on the sidelines, what is to prevent you from coming over here and helping us? We need your faith and your gifts. We need your creativity and your passion. We long for your friendship. Come and see what God is doing among us. Look on this miracle in the Land of the Sky, and rejoice!

May we all remember how this chapter ends... At the conclusion of the Pentecost miracle, Acts, chapter 2, the Holy Spirit has been unleashed on the world, and—says the author—“They all praised God and had the goodwill of all people...and day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

CHARGE TO THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF ASHEVILLE, JUNE 9, 2019

1. Let us continue to love one another. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn. 13:35). May we continue reaching out to those who have left this year, and continue reconciling with one another as we heal at the broken places.
2. Let us keep learning from one another. Embrace the Discernment Team’s wisdom of encouraging us to deepen our friendships with each another by listening to one another’s stories.
3. Let us recognize the suffering that LGBTQ people endure, and do everything we can to live in solidarity with those who long for refuge in a loving community. Jesus said, “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to [one of these] in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward” (Mt. 10:42).