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Fire and Water – Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

You could easily spend all your time trying to figure out what God is up to. These two passages of Scripture are case in point: in the first, people are getting too confident, cocky and self-reliant, setting themselves up against God. So God makes a unified humankind into a diverse, uncooperative mob. This could also be called the birthday of the church! – or, at least, a prefiguring of it...

Then, in the passage from Acts, God takes that diversity, and brings it back together, unifies it. People from all over the world, speaking all the languages that God himself spread like a virus to break the common purpose of people into scattered dependency, have come together in the city of Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. Suddenly, they find themselves able to understand – in their own primary tongue, not some heavenly Esperanto – a band of wide-eyed Galileans shouting out incredible words of praise to God. *This* is what we really call the

birthday of the church: the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the beginning of a whole new way of God participating in human history.

But that Holy Spirit unity can be pretty hard to see. It's not obvious, at least not in our everyday lives. There're quite a few things that all of us here in this room have in common, but the kind of united planning and action that produced the Tower of Babel isn't among them! Where there're two or three of *us*, there's at least four or five opinions, ten ways to get something done, and even more suggestions on how each of us could do it better ourselves!

That's the fallout of the fall of Babel. It wasn't just a single language that God dispersed; God brought to an end a whole way of communication and coordination, of relating to each other, a willingness and ability to work together toward a common goal.

What happened in this moment on the day of Pentecost completely changed everything, though it didn't reverse it. Pentecost brought a new unity, this time one given by God and not created by people. This was something new and different: while the Spirit of God had worked in people in the past, now it became available to everyone. It is the baptism of the Spirit.

Now, a slight digression: all the Apostles had been baptized with water, a symbolic washing away of sins and former life. The baptism of the Holy Spirit, which began on Pentecost, is an indwelling of God,

literally, an inspiration, of followers of Jesus. And, since on that first Pentecost it was accompanied by something that looked like “tongues of fire” on the apostles, it has been symbolized by fire.

Most of us here were baptized as infants, sprinkled with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition and belief, both the symbolic washing and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit happen at the same time, at baptism. In the words to be spoken by the pastor at baptism, “By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ’s ministry of love, peace, and justice.” So, we’ve got two symbols, both for the Holy Spirit and for Baptism: Fire and Water.

It’s interesting how often fire and water are paired, not just in religious talk, where they both purify, cleanse, and renew – and destroy; but in other ways. Think of ordinary fire, ordinary water: water can put out fire; fire can evaporate water, so each can destroy the other. But fire and water can also work together: in cooking, making steam for power, heating our buildings. Both can kill; both can maintain or even save life.

As I say every Sunday when I pour water into the bowl, not only is water essential for life, but the water reminds us of the baptism that binds us together as believers. And then Sadie and Seth come down the aisle and light the candles: fire, with the water, both symbols of the Holy Spirit, both symbols of God’s work and presence in and among us.

But to get back to us: we are a people who are each individuals, created and loved by God as individuals, still, at the same time drawn together by the Holy Spirit into a single purpose: to serve God, in what we say, how we act, who we are.

Valley Presbyterian Church's mission statement is, "To know Christ, and make him known in word and deed." Part of our humanness that comes from Babel is that despite our unity in Christ, our unity of purpose is harder to accomplish. We each have our way of doing things; we each have our perspective and our own understanding of faith and way of living that out. And we are thrown together with people we don't know, with whom we may disagree – and that can be very uncomfortable at times.

Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit – and our baptism means that we have both water and fire in us, with all the conflicts and happy synergies those things possess right inside us. We are, like it or not, by the virtue of God's own action, each called to live out our lives in service to God as God leads us. That happens in such little things as sharing and caring for one another in all things, including letting the office know someone's sick or in the hospital or feeling ignored by the church.

That's a simple and important part of who we are: letting us be the church to this church, which is you. Caring for each other, praying for each other, worshiping with each other.

One more lesson from these lessons: our God is a God who blesses humanity by limiting humanity. We're all just dust, blowing through this life, limited in the amount of good we can do on our own, but also given the priceless opportunity for God to work in and through us.

United in our purpose by the gift of the Holy Spirit, individuals called into being the church, nothing in God's will can be impossible for us. The balance of fire and water, for good, for building up, for hope, healing, and nourishment of our souls, is ours because God has given us a unity beyond comprehension in the Holy Spirit.