

According to the Book of Genesis, after the great flood, only Noah and his family survived. They and all their descendants spoke the same language until a group of them settling in a valley in the land of Shinar decided to make their own bricks and mortar, construct a city, build a tower, and call attention to themselves. God was not pleased. The Lord said, “If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.” God took away their language, assigned each person their own, and ended their ability to communicate—because of the Tower of Babel. The people scattered far and wide, something they had hoped to avoid. Today the inability to speak the same language both literally and metaphorically—even within the same family like Noah’s—causes division.

Pentecost Sunday celebrates the day when languages reunited. According to Acts of the Apostles, the disciples gathered in an upper room. “Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.” This fire of the Spirit did not appear like ears that hear the gospel, nor as eyes that see the wonders of God, nor as hands that build the kingdom of God—all of which would have proven meaningful too. No, the fiery Spirit came upon each as a tongue, the organ that speaks the language we know. At the beginning of the bible, the Spirit of the Lord swept over the waters to create the world. Sin divided humanity. The Spirit returned on Pentecost to restore unity. At the time of that first Pentecost, descendants of those who built the Tower of Babel still lived scattered among different cities with various languages. Devout Jews from those locations had gathered in Jerusalem for an annual agricultural feast. As the disciples burst from their upper room, all those visitors heard the gospel in their own language. They experienced a treasured gift their ancestors had lost: unity.

Pentecost suggests how we can build unity with one another whenever we experience divisions. Devout Christians who cannot agree on politics, civil rights, or their favorite pope all share one thing in common: the gospel. The gospel unites us, just as it did on that first Pentecost. Because of the gospel people who cannot agree with one another out in the world can enter a church and praise God with one voice, hear the good news with one ear, and behold the mystery of redemption with one eye. Pentecost still restores what Babel undid: the unity of our language, our purpose, and our hearts.

The sin of the people building the Tower of Babel was presumption. They did whatever they presumed to do. In our culture that temptation remains strong. Each of us loves the freedom to do whatever we presume, even if it costs someone else’s freedom. We have the freedom to sin; that doesn’t mean we should use it. The Holy Spirit bestows gifts at Pentecost not for our own benefit, but to proclaim the gospel to those who do not yet believe. They will not believe its words if they do not see it in our deeds. When we cannot communicate with someone else, the time has come to listen more deeply and ask if we are understanding their views correctly. Then we can find points of unity that will convince the world when our tongues proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.