

The Most Unruly Part of Us  
Sunday, January 7, 2024

- The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Acts 19:6 And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

- New to the United States, a woman named Nitya was eager to meet people. One day she struck up a conversation with the only other woman in the gym. Pointing to two men playing racquetball in a nearby court, I said to her, "There's my husband." Then I added, "The thin one-not the flabby one." After a slightly uncomfortable silence she replied, "And that's my husband- the flabby one."\* We've all been there, that moment when we realize that we are not in control of our big mouths. Controlling those big mouths is part of the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is symbolized by one of the strangest of all His gifts; the gift of tongues.
- I want to begin by noting that I believe that all the gifts are still in effect. The Holy Spirit came with gifts, spiritual abilities given to people for the purpose of glorifying God and meeting needs. There are lists of them in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 & 14 and elsewhere. Scholars suggest that these lists are not exhaustive. I suspect that it true. Some scholars and pastors believe that some or all of the gifts died out with the last apostle and were meant for only the first one or two generations of Christians. I don't believe that. I think that the Holy Spirit is the same today as He was 2,000 years ago and that all the gifts are still in effect. That being said, there is some question as to the purpose of some of the gifts.
- The gift of tongues symbolize the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people closer to God by the reversal of the judgment of the Tower of Babel. Gifts of healing are fairly self-explanatory. While anyone can pray for healing on behalf of others, some people seem to have extraordinary success in this endeavor. They have the gift of healing. Everyone should be willing to explain why they believe in Jesus, but some people seem to be extraordinarily successful in presenting Christ to others. They have the gift of an evangelist. The purpose of such gifts are easily discerned, but tongues are strange. What's the point of speaking or praying in a language that is either unlearned or unlearnable? To borrow from the great question we should ask of all sermons, what is the point? There are two points to be made about this. First, the gift of tongues symbolize the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people closer to God and, in doing so, reversing the judgment of the Tower of Babel. The second purpose is that it symbolizes the work of the Holy Spirit in taking the

most unruly part of us, our tongues (our big mouths) and bringing them under control. To understand the point to such a gift one has to review Genesis 11:1-9 and James 3:1-12.

- In the episodes of early human history, the story in Genesis 11 begins at a point when people are starting to organize into cities. According to the story, people, who all spoke the same language, agreed to “build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves.” In other words, let us build a temple to a god who can give us what we need to be successful without the God of Noah. The Lord saw this and said, “let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's' speech.” Because He found that people had a tendency to worship a god who will give them what they want, any god other than the true God, the Almighty confuses the languages in limit the mischief humanity can achieve. The gift of tongues shows that the Holy Spirit is moving people toward unity under Christ, with the ultimate goal of a unified language in the Kingdom of God. The gift of tongues shows that the Holy Spirit works to reverse the curse of the Tower of Babel.
- The gift of tongues also symbolize the work of the Holy Spirit by bringing even the most unruly part of us under control. The Book of James, that most practical book of the New Testament, believed to be written by one of the brothers of Jesus, says “for we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.” The tongue, the faculty of speech, is a “fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.” The gift of tongues symbolizes the Holy Spirit to bring self-control to even that most unruly part of our nature, the tongue.
- The Holy Spirit works to bring the truth of Scripture and the promises to God to bear on the daily lives. The gifts, which are part of that work, are abilities granted to people for the benefit of others. One of the strangest of those gifts is that of tongues, but even that has purpose in that it symbolizes the Spirit's work of unifying people under Christ and bring them under self-control, even that most unruly faculty, the tongue. This is just part of all the work that the Holy Spirit does.