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# LIKE BUTTER...

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Acts 2:1-12



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Acts – the Acts of the Apostles –one of the most interesting books of the bible. This book is a wonderful history of the first days of the fledgling Christian Church, and the more I think about it, the more I love the story of the very first day, the birthday of the church – Pentecost. Let me draw your attention for a second to verse 12.

“All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ...What does this mean? And isn’t that what people have been asking for thousands of years? What does this mean?”

I think it’ll help if we think about the book *The Acts of the Apostles* as not so much being about the deeds of the apostles as it is about the deeds of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. I mean, if we read on from where we left off today, Peter is about to give the greatest sermon ever given – thousands of lives will be changed forever – about 3,000 people converted that day alone! Why? Because the Holy Spirit stepped in and inspired Peter to get up and say something – to communicate Jesus’ message to the crowd.

This story reminds me of another story from way back in the Hebrew Bible – Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel. I talked about this in October!

So this story goes way back to sometime shortly after the great flood, and the earth had only one language. Now, the descendants of Noah were migrating across the plain of Shinar and they found a spot they liked so they decided that they would build a great city there. The crown jewel of this city was to be a tower – a huge tower so high that its top was to be “in the heavens.”

Now I’m not sure what ‘in the heavens’ really meant to those folks back then, but suffice it to say that this tower wasn’t just going to be tall; it was going to be really tall, so that these people could make a name for themselves: “Look how great we are!” I get it. They wanted to stick together. They wanted to hang out with people they already knew – it’s way more comfortable that way, right? ...and it’s easier.

God told them to go out, be fruitful, and multiply; but the people basically said, “No, thanks, God, we’re good -- we’ll just stay here together and talk to each other about how great we think we are.” Rather a self-centered, don’t you think? Disobeying God, afraid of being scattered over the earth, when that was just what God wanted. They were only thinking about themselves. Very understandable – it’s human nature.

Of course God saw what they were doing and put a stop to it in a very creative way. One thing you gotta love about God – no lack of imagination! God didn’t just come down and smite them with lightning or brimstone – and we just had a flood so that wasn’t an option.

God was pretty impressed with their work, but knew the tower was only a beginning. But it was such a great city that God was worried they would never leave it -- that they wouldn't go out and be fruitful. So -- and I think this is pretty sly -- God took their one language, their means of communication, and made them all speak different languages, so they couldn't understand a word anybody was saying. Can you imagine....

By switching up their language, God forced them to follow the command. They had to go out into the world. They couldn't stay home in their comfortable city, where they could only socialize with family and friends, only thinking of themselves. God didn't want them to be so self-centered. God isn't a big fan of sticking to oneself and keeping to one's own group. That's what makes a clique, right?

In today's story we can see the same thing with the disciples. They had been given the great commission by Jesus in Matthew 28 -- anyone remember what the great commission is? "Go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., and teaching them...." Telling the disciples, in effect, "go out and multiply."

And what were the disciples doing? Hiding. They were hiding out in some upstairs room -- sticking together -- not going out, not following the great commission. Instead they were probably reminiscing, like we do, telling stories about Jesus and old times. "Wasn't that great...?" or "Remember that time when Jesus said this or did that?"

Of course they were sad. I imagine the loss was still pretty fresh. They were mourning the death of their friend and their teacher -- the man they had walked all over Judea with (those who have calculated the Jesus' mileage during His public ministry (for trips alone) estimate it to be about 3,125 miles); the man they ate with and slept with for 3 three years. Not to mention that they really didn't have any idea how to go about this great commission thing Jesus had asked of them. They were thinking about themselves.

But 50 days had passed since Jesus' resurrection, 49 actually, which probably means something to the biblical numerologists, but that's for another day... Ten days since his ascension, and apparently God felt it was high time the disciples got up off their -- chairs -- and got on with the business of spreading the Good News. Like they'd been asked to do.

I can see them now, sitting around rehashing old times: "Hey Peter, remember that time He got you to actually step out of the boat? You should have seen your face!" When all of a sudden the whole house was filled with a terrifying sound like rushing wind -- out of the heavens, it says. Well, they're only human -- I imagine they all ran outside talking and yelling, "There's something on your head -- what is that? It looks like -- fire!" And since the sound came from the sky then the whole neighborhood was probably outside scrambling for cover!

And that's when things got weird. See, there were people in Jerusalem from all over. The author, presumably Luke, specifically names 15 different nationalities. There were visitors there from the entire known world at the time, and they all heard 12 hicks from the boondocks of Galilee speaking in all of their various native languages. Did you hear that? 12 guys spoke 15 different languages. The Holy Spirit does indeed inspire communication.

God sent the Holy Spirit to make a way for the disciples to begin their ministry. God sent the Holy Spirit to make a way for them to communicate the Good News. That's what both of these stories are about – communication.

Through the Acts of the Apostles and the selfish folks back there on the Plain of Shinar, God makes it pretty clear that we are not to stay home, all shut up in our safe and comfortable ruts; we are to get out and talk to people – like at a party – mingle – communicate! And the Holy Spirit is here to help us – it's a promise.

The Holy Spirit has been portrayed through the ages with many familiar images. One of the earliest is in Genesis 1: “And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” The word used here for ‘spirit’ is the Hebrew word *ruach*. It's also the word wind, and the word for breath. *Ruach*...

In Genesis 2 the Lord breathes into the nostrils of the mud-man, *adam*, and it becomes the first living human being – which, by the way, is a neat little foreshadowing of John 20:22, where Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Both Old and New Testaments use the image of fire for the Spirit. Isaiah 4:4 says, “The Lord will cleanse...Jerusalem... with a spirit of fire...” And in Luke 12:49 Jesus says, “I have come to bring fire on the earth,” as well as the tongues of fire we just read about.

Water is another one. The scriptures are full of water images. God is always pouring out the Holy Spirit on someone or some thing. Think baptism...

Sometimes the Holy Spirit is represented by the image of a cloud. Remember Moses at Mt. Sinai. The pillar of smoke by day and fire by night, and the cloud overshadowing the tent of meeting in the desert. Something I didn't know before was that the same word is used in the beginning of Luke – Mary is ‘overshadowed’ by the Holy Spirit, and suddenly she's pregnant with Jesus.

And, of course, who doesn't think of a dove? One of the events recorded by all four Gospels is Jesus' baptism. It's also one of the few places where all three forms of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are present in one place. It is interesting I think to remember that the dove has been a bringer of good news before. Where else? Anyone?

Noah sends the dove out to find dry land and it brings back what – an olive branch; more good news.

As soon as the baptism is over, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit, but not the dove for some reason, to be tested. It's the start of Jesus' ministry which is the communication of the idea that we are all brothers and sisters put here on earth to serve God by serving each other.

The very nature and purpose of this Spirit may be to loosen or soften boundaries and identities. Think about what fire does: it melts things, it purifies things, it chemically changes the very substance of the things it comes in contact with. The same with water. If I remember high school chemistry -- which I don't, really -- water is a kind of catalyst -- and agent that makes change happen -- bubbling up, dissolving, softening, getting into all the nooks and crannies -- like butter melting on a warm English muffin.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Catherine of Siena made the analogy that God is the table, Jesus is the food, and the Spirit is the server. I have been a waiter and if the waiter isn't someone who can soften boundaries and encourage communication, I don't know who is! Maybe the Spirit levels the playing field.

The Holy Spirit prepares the way for communication.

St Francis of Assisi, popularly known for being especially good with animals and birds and loving the poor lived during the political turmoil of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The "Holy Roman Empire" was fairly united at this time in a series of Crusades against the Muslims, the Jews, and other so-called heretics. It was during the 5<sup>th</sup> crusade in 1219 that the Holy Spirit came over Francis and he did something completely contrary to this culture of war, oppression, and hatred -- not to mention it was just plain crazy! You see the Sultan of Egypt had decreed that anyone who brought him the head of a Christian would be rewarded with a Byzantine gold piece.

After going to Cardinal Pelagius, the Christian commander, and begging him to stop the fighting, Francis and a companion known only as Brother Illuminatus, unarmed and filled with love for his 'enemy' set out to visit the Sultan, Malik-al-Kamal, nephew of the great Saladin. The men of the Sultan's army captured the two men and dragged them, beaten and exhausted before the Sultan -- which was just what Francis wanted.

Some accounts claim that Francis was actually hoping to be martyred, but the Spirit seems to have touched the Sultan as well. He was receptive to the unarmed men and he asked them, "Who sent you?" and "Why are you here?"

Francis replied that they had been sent by God and not by men, to show the Sultan and his subjects the way of salvation and to proclaim the truth of the Gospel; and when the Sultan saw Francis' enthusiasm and courage he listened to him willingly. He even invited the two men to stay awhile.

Imagine – for Francis, a devout Christian, to enthusiastically share the Gospel is one thing. But to do it without insulting Islam or denying Mohammed must have come as quite a surprise to the Sultan – as it no doubt would even today. Both men were changed by the meeting. When Francis finally left to go home, the Sultan showered him with gifts – which Francis gave away, of course, due to his vow of poverty.

Upon arriving home, Francis shared his newfound respect for his Muslim brothers and sisters with his community, which helped to break down the existing bigotry and hatred. He was especially impressed by the Muslim practice of praying five times a day and he urged his Christian brothers to make prayer a larger part of their everyday lives. Anybody here pray five times a day?

Meeting the Sultan confirmed to Francis that we really are all brothers and sisters. But they say the Sultan was changed as well. He placed Francis and Brother Illuminatus under his personal security and provided safe passage through Muslim states, and several accounts report that he began treating the Christian prisoners with unprecedented kindness and charity. Ten years later he negotiated a peace with Frederick II, returning Jerusalem and other holy sites to the Crusaders. But it didn't last.

The Holy Spirit was with both men, softening their hearts, melting prejudices, and getting into all the nooks and crannies of their new relationship – just like butter on a muffin!

Neither man was converted but they both came away better men for the mutual respect they were able to show one another. Neither man was converted, but they were able to respectfully agree to disagree – to embrace their differences.

I saw a bumper sticker that I may have mentioned before – it reads, “When God said ‘Love your enemies’, I’m pretty sure He didn’t mean kill them.” Well. Love your enemies. We don’t have to like them, but the word ‘love’ does imply a certain amount of respect, doesn’t it? For a great definition of love check out *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*.

The Holy Spirit desires communication. That’s what Francis was doing – communicating -- the first inter-faith dialogue. St Francis was ecumenical before ecumenical was cool!

Since we're all brothers and sisters shouldn't we be engaged in dialogue with people who believe differently than we do? If we're made in the image of God, aren't we then little Christs in the making? And as little Christs, shouldn't we at least be in conversation with the marginalized and those we think are different – the Muslim community, the LGBT community, the homeless, the undocumented, the prisoners? That's what God wants. That's what Jesus taught – and demonstrated time and again....

When we take the time to get to know a member of one of those marginalized groups, suddenly they become real human beings with real human fears and real human needs, hopes, and dreams.

The Holy Spirit inspires communication. And the Spirit will prepare the way. It's what the spirit does, if we let it. We don't have to convert everybody – or anybody – that's God's job. We have to be willing to go when the Spirit moves us. We have to remember that we're all brothers and sisters on this planet; which brings up one question: If we are all brothers and sisters, who are these enemies that we're supposed to love?

Like butter melting on a warm English muffin, the Holy Spirit spread liberally over the conversation softens our hearts and gets into all the little nooks and crannies of our relationships. We just have to let it.

Amen.