



*Saturated in Spirit (Acts 2:17) © 2020 Lauren Wright Pittman

Found in Translation

preaching, each in our own language, about the marvels of God!" All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other, "What does this mean?" But others said mockingly, "They've drunk too much new wine!" Then Peter stood up with the Eleven and addressed the crowd: "Women and men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem! Listen to what I have to say! These people are not drunk as you think—it's only nine o'clock in the morning! No, this is what Joel the prophet spoke of:

*In the days to come, God declares,
I will pour out my Spirit
on all humankind.
Your daughters and sons will prophesy,
your young people will see visions,
and your elders will dream dreams.
Even on the most insignificant of my people,
both women and men,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

*And I will display wonders
in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below:
blood, fire and billowing smoke.
The sun will be turned into darkness
and the moon will become blood
before the coming of the
great and sublime day of our God.
And all who call upon the name
of the our God will be saved.*

Philippians 4:4-7.² Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness³ be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Jailhouse Blues Joy. Last time I preached, Paul and Silas were in jail. And here we are today, Paul in jail. Both times, jailed for seditious activity. Why is it that some people get away with sedition, while others are crucified for it? Maybe it's a Southern thing, but I think we all know somebody who always seems to be in trouble with the law. For Paul—and for the Early Church on Pentecost—we are called to stay in good trouble. Even though is Paul a repeat offender, his letter is filled with joy and gratitude, even from the Empire's jailhouse to the church at Philippi.

The Last Chapter. Some scholars believe that Paul was nearing the end of his life. In my role as a pastoral care provider, I have been honored to accompany people at end-of-life. It's true, we die the way we have lived. The overwhelming majority of people I've encountered are grateful as they face the final journey. "I've had a good run. I love you, and I'm sorry for the ways I disappointed you. You've been such a good friend. Can you

¹ *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*, Priests for Equality (Lanham, Maryland: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), Acts 2.

² New Revised Standard Version (Updated Version), Calvary's common translation

³ Barclay notes: "The Greeks themselves explained this word as 'justice and something better than justice.' They said that *epieikeia* ought to come in when strict justice becomes unjust because of its generality." (Tanis, 688, see below)

believe how much fun we had! Or, to quote Paul: *I thank my God on every remembrance of you*⁴.” To look back on life and savor the grace, that’s my prayer for each of us.

And then, to leave some wisdom behind. Paul’s epistle, writes Justin Tanis, is advice for the early Jesus followers, like those who gathered on Pentecost, “those whom the wider society viewed as unacceptable, illegitimate. Those who were discovering a joy that the condemnation of others could not dampen.”⁵

People of the margins, disrupting societal norms, willing to get into trouble by following Jesus.

MEMORIAL DAY IS DEDICATED TO REMEMBERING the people who died in service to these goals.

Divide & Conquer. The “Rededicate 250” rally held last Sunday in DC was, at best, unhelpful⁶ to the cause of the Constitution. Its four-hour presentation implied quite clearly that Christianity is—or ought to be—the state religion. It was led by current administration officials.

The next day, the Islamic Center in San Diego County was targeted⁷ by shooters who had been radicalized by the sin of white Christian nationalism. White Christian Nationalism employs race and religion to divide us—so that they can control us.⁸

Spirit’s Gift of Reconciliation. But the church was created as an divine act of reconciliation—grace poured out on those who were divided—bringing together all genders, too. The Greek words⁹ [Bible words] for Spirit are [often] feminine. She, the Spirit, *gives birth* to the church.¹⁰ Going back to the original feminine words for God offers a corrective balance for those who worship a macho version of Jesus.¹¹

The first church goers were divided by race, culture, gender—and language. God the Spirit entered on the wind, dangling tongues of flame over their heads. She activated her Universal Translator from *Star Trek*, her Babel Fish from the *Hitchhiker’s Guide*. The first church service was an example of what my interpreter friend, Noemi, calls *justicia linguistica*—linguistic justice: when everybody present gets what they need to participate fully.¹²

Salvation Through Reconciliation. God the Spirit came so that people of wildly diverse ethnic backgrounds—nationalities, genders, colors, traditions—in the words of Jesus “might be made one.”¹³ And for that morning, they understood one another. They shared the wonders of God. Notice that it doesn’t say that they all agreed with one another. *Understanding* was enough for reconciliation. Being together with the Holy Spirit, and to finally feel understood, was—and still is—our salvation.

Babel. Who remembers the story of the Tower of Babel? Genesis 11. A great civilization with one language and one ambition. *Let’s build a tower, fabulously tall, reach past the sky, and we will touch God, our very own stairway to heaven. A monument to our glory. Move over, Jehovah, make room for us up there.*

Hubris as arrogant as leading voices of our day—those who want *their* artificial intelligence to replace us and supplant the work of shalom, what Psalm 90 calls “the work of our hands.”¹⁴ The breathless energy of Babel.

Look at what we can do in lock step. Look how far we can go if we focus on us. We build this monument to ourselves.

Remarkably, God doesn’t destroy it. Instead, God scatters its builders. Separates the people. Confuses their languages. Was this old-fashioned divine punishment? Or was it an act of grace? Here’s the sticky part.

Uniformity is not unity. They world’s apart. Unity is different from uniformity.

⁴ Philippians 1:3

⁵ Justin Tanis, *The Queer Bible Commentary, 2nd Edition* (London: SCM Press, 2022), 673.

⁶ Chris Brennan, “Rededicate 250 focus...” *USA Today*, May 17, 2026 available online at <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2026/05/17/trump-rededicate-250-religion-prayer-national-mall/90067492007/>> (May 20, 2026)

⁷ 2026 Islamic Center of San Diego Shooting, available online at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Islamic_Center_of_San_Diego_shooting> (May 23, 2026)

⁸ “White Christian Nationalism” Americans United for Separation of Church and State, available online at <<https://www.au.org/how-we-protect-religious-freedom/issues/white-christian-nationalism/>> (May 22, 2026)

⁹ When I preached this sermon on May 24, 2026, I got this wrong. My memory crafted a new definition of *pneuma*, perhaps through wishful thinking. The Greek (NT) word for Spirit is not feminine. Rather, *pneuma* is neuter. However, the Hebrew (OT) words for Spirit, such as *ruach*, are feminine. Interestingly, and beside the point for this apology, the Aramaic word, *rukha*, that Jesus would have *spoken* for Spirit is feminine. Here, I could explore my aging brain’s confusion more, but I’ll leave it here and say that I can only pray that mine was a benign mistake in the larger scheme of things. I am biased toward feminism.

¹⁰ *Pneuma* is neuter. See previous note.

¹¹ Explore more in Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s 2020 book: *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Divided a Nation*.

¹² Of course, this kind of *justicia* would extend past language to offer accessibility for everyone present at a church gathering. It takes thinking and preparation, but it is very possible.

¹³ John 17:11 ‘And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.’ illustrates clearly the Early Church’s concept of *salvation*: one with God, one with one another.

¹⁴ I asked Anthropic’s AI “Claude” for feedback on this sermon, especially this passage where I, at first, decried AI as soulless, unfeeling and devoid of the virtues we value. Claude corrected me—eerily, yes, but truthfully—remind me that “AI helped you build this sermon, and you’re standing here preaching it in the Spirit’s name. That’s not a confession of weakness — that’s actually evidence for your point. The Spirit translates even through the tools we use imperfectly.” Claude is unique amongst AI, in that it is governed by a moral “constitution” developed by Anthropic’s ethicists <<https://www.anthropic.com/constitution>>. More discussion at <<https://www.npr.org/2026/02/18/nx-s1-5717561/do-the-people-building-the-ai-chatbot-claude-understand-what-theyve-created>>.

Lockstep is not togetherness. Uniformity is great in a machine: everyone expressing the same thoughts, voting the same way. Babel was just an ancient form of totalitarianism but with impressive architecture. Like the ballroom or the arch.¹⁵

God slowed down the progress of Babel. They weren't ready for that kind of progress. God forced them into the discomfort of different languages. And from *the necessity of accommodating one another* miracles sprung up. Humility. Interdependence. The slow-moving blessing of having to listen to someone who doesn't sound like you. An act of blessing. Some say that Pentecost is the *reversal* of Babel. No, Pentecost is the Spirit's outpouring of reconciliation when, finally, the people understood God's grace well enough to build something worth preserving: the church.

God confused the nations of Babel so that when the Spirit arrived on Pentecost, there would be enough variety in the room to prove God's point: you don't have to sound alike to understand one another. You don't have to look alike to belong to one another. Pentecost completes the lesson of Babel. **To love God's image is to honor diversity.**

Scandalize the Empire. The Spirit still translates what lies beneath our words—interpreting body language, stories, yearning, the common ache of being human, living in the mind of God. The Spirit's work of reconciliation is everything empire despises. And it's why our dear jailbird friend, Paul, always awaits another trial. Empire operates on Babel's logic. One Caesar. One approved way of being in polite society.

But Paul preached Jesus Christ is Lord, not Caesar, and in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. To be one in Christ is to experience the diversity on which unity depends. The church was created to make good trouble, to scandalize every empire.

So, under the threat of death, Paul writes: *Rejoice, and I'll say it again, rejoice. Do not be anxious for anything, but present your needs to God through prayer and petition, and give thanks in every circumstance.*

Paul was not made of stronger stuff than us. He simply remembered "the Lord is near." Like Paul, perhaps you have been tested at the load-bearing point. And you didn't collapse. We are more than we appear to be! Dr. King wrote about it from the Birmingham Jail. Nelson Mandela, after twenty-seven years, emerged without bitterness.

We don't have to pretend that things are fine when they're not. Just rely on Spirit to translate this world—the dread, the uncertainty, the grief—into prayer.

Babel's imperial noise is loud. It should be; they practice it every day! The vertigo you feel is real. But beware, the empire needs us to forget the Prince of Peace and turn on one another.

The Spirit that descended on that hopelessly diverse, frightened, optimistic congregation—is the same Spirit holding us right now. From Fillmore Street to the shores of Lake Tahoe to every location on the livestream.

On Pentecost, we say thank you God that together we are the body of Christ, unified enough for anything. We will not be lost in translation. With the Spirit as our interpreter, we will find one another in it. Happy birthday, Church. And many more.

Amen.

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Benediction. *Do not be anxious for anything, but present your needs to God through prayer and petition, and give thanks in every circumstance. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds, and in Christ Jesus, let the church say amen.*

¹⁵ < <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/21/us/politics/trump-arch-approved.html> >

