

The Courage to Be
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-11

Pentecost Sunday

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Dr. Paul Tillich was arguably the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, certainly one of the four or five most influential. Fired from his teaching post in Germany by Adolf Hitler, Tillich came to the U. S. where he spent a distinguished career teaching at Union Seminary in New York City and at Harvard Divinity School.

In 1952 in the aftermath of World War II, Tillich sensed that the winds of history were shifting, and he wrote one of his most influential books, the best seller *The Courage to Be*. The years following the war, he said, created an awakening within people in this country and in Western Europe. He observed that this awakening was leading to a breakdown of the cultures' traditional religious and political beliefs. He sensed that the world was losing the spiritual center that had long answered deep questions about the meaning of life. The world, he said, was gradually becoming aware that it was free to not believe in God.

Tillich said that this new freedom brought with it an overwhelming sense of responsibility. If God wasn't the central driving force of history, then we must be. This awakening produced what he called "the age of anxiety." Without those beliefs that had long sustained the world, people felt anxious and were threatened by what he called non-being. So Tillich used that book to call for courage, the courage to be. Despite the upheaval in the world, he challenged people to live with purpose and meaning.

I read *The Courage to Be* for the first time when I was in college. It's heavy reading, and didn't really understand it. So I read it again in seminary and began to grasp its profound meaning. I'm beginning to think that it may be time to read it for the third time. As I observe our culture today, I sense great unsettledness, dissatisfaction, polarization, and fear. Our traditional religious and political beliefs are again being called into question. I was reminded of this Wednesday night. Twenty-six year old Richard Ivey, who grew up in this church, shared his religious autobiography. I knew this

already, but he reminded us that those of his generation who still find meaning and value in religion seek a religious and church experience that is much different than mine. The religious institutions of this country are in the midst of a massive paradigm shift. Churches are feeling it. Denominations are feeling it. Seminaries are feeling it. Though our graduates may not be aware of it yet, they too soon will feel it. We are again in a time that calls for courage, the courage to be.

These shifting winds of history, of course, have always occurred. The Old Testament story of the tower of Babel is an ancient example. This story is believed to be one of the oldest texts in the Bible. It is an important and fascinating text that tries to account for upheaval in the ancient world. Why were there many languages rather than only one? Why were there multiple families or nations upon the earth rather than only one? God did it, they said in this story, and here's what happened. They said that the people of the earth at one time were all one nation with one language. The people arrogantly believed that they could build a tower that stretched to the heavens. With human effort and ingenuity, they believed they could gain access God. So they set about building this tower, and God had to intervene. God thwarted their arrogant plans by confusing their language and scattering the people. From that point onward, there were many languages upon the earth and many nations. They called the place Babel, which means confusion, because there God confused their language.

The experience of Pentecost is another important and fascinating story of upheaval. Today we refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the church. It occurred fifty days after the resurrection. The disciples of Jesus—apparently a small number at this time—were all in Jerusalem in one place. And suddenly they heard a sound. It was like the rush of a mighty of wind. Then they saw a sight they had never seen: tongues as of fire, resting upon each of them. And then each one was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in “other languages.”

Notice that this gift of tongues at Pentecost was the exact opposite of what happened at the tower of Babel. At Babel, one people with one language was scattered and their language confused. At Pentecost, many people with many languages became as one. The disciples were able to speak a language of the Spirit that everyone could understand. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia and Judea: regardless of where the people came from or what language they spoke, they all could hear and

understand the preaching of the disciples. It was a miracle that had never occurred and to my knowledge has not occurred since. God was preparing that small group of disciples to launch into the world with the Good News.

Those were times of change. The winds of history were shifting. God was at work. They were times that demanded courage, the courage to be.

These graduates are facing such times. The winds of history are shifting again, and our world desperately needs young men and women who have courage to live with purpose and meaning. As they close one chapter in their life and open another, I give our graduates these three challenges.

First, have the courage to follow God's leading. That's what happened to those early disciples of Jesus. They could all fit in one room then. Surely none of them could have imagined that the church would eventually become a global force for justice and righteousness. But it has because they and others had courage to follow God's leading

I urge our graduates to have the courage to follow God's leading too. Believe that God wants to use you to do something great. The world needs godly engineers, godly teachers, godly chemists and businessmen and pharmacists and physicists. You don't have to become a missionary to follow God's leading. Have courage to follow wherever God leads you.

Second, have the courage not to settle for frivolous religion. As our graduates move away, they will discover churches that are a lot different from Weatherly. That doesn't mean that they are wrong. There are many different forms, so don't confuse form with substance. Never compromise substance. We have a phrase we use in my family from time to time. If we're watching a movie and some character is out of step with the others, obviously doesn't grasp what's happening, one of us will say, "He doesn't get it."

The same thing happens in church. Some are present, but they don't really grasp what's happening. Others stand on the sideline and toss criticisms. You will meet some who have never dug deeply, who have never struggled to believe or disbelieve. "Religion," they say, "is all made up. You create your own God in your mind and then believe in it." But you see anyone can do that. As easily as someone can create a god and believe in it, someone else can create a little god with a little Jesus and *disbelieve* in them.

That takes little effort. They don't get it. That's frivolous religion, and I urge you to have courage not to settle for that.

And finally have the courage to make a difference. Let that be your aim in life. There's nothing wrong with making money. I hope you make a boatload of it. Believe, though, that making a difference is more important. There's nothing wrong with making a name for yourself. I hope we'll all be asking for your autograph some day. But believe that making a difference is even more important.

One of the saddest things would be to stand at the other end of life and look back across the years and realize that you failed to stand for the things that really do matter. So I urge you to have courage to make a difference.

The winds of history are shifting. We need these graduates, don't we? The world needs them. The church needs them. We need you to have courage, the courage to be.

Closing Prayer

Lord, take these young men and women, filled with so much potential, and make them ambassadors for Christ. Amen.