I was listening to an interview with the *Wall Street Journal’s* economic writer Joseph Sternberg the other day and he was discussing how in economic policy people often confuse outputs with inputs – pretty exciting stuff I know. He stated that if you took something like a statistic, which showed that when economic times were good more people owned homes, many people have falsely concluded that increasing home ownership creates a booming economy rather than the other way round. He stated that it is in fact a thriving economy, which creates the increase in home ownership. So a better economy means more people own homes and you cannot make this work in reverse. But because people have not understood this, politicians have created economic policies, which encouraged home ownership. However, such tale wagging the dog policies have resulted in things like the housing bubble, because there was not a thriving economy in place to sustain the increase in home ownership. Now I don’t really care if you agree with this argument but just wanted to use it to illustrate that sometimes we may focus on the wrong things and use outputs to try and produce inputs, which naturally enough gets us to Pentecost and speaking in tongues.

Today is Pentecost, which in Greek means fiftieth because today is the fiftieth day after Passover. Most everyone remembers this day for this passage from Acts which reads, “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’” It is pretty memorable with the whole everyone being able to understand each other business, but I think that the tongue stuff gets all of the focus which may make us miss what is really the lesson of the text. Today seems to be the result of something much deeper, but to get to that let’s work backwards and start with the language thing and what it signifies.

If you have ever spent much time in a foreign country, like Hungary, Latvia or northern Minnesota, where you did not speak the language you have probably noticed that you experienced some isolation. Language is one of the most common ways we interact with one another and when this tool is taken away it creates a certain amount of distance between ourselves and others because we are unable to have the bond that language provides. In a foreign county we can be amid a group of people and yet feel completely alone because we have no idea what is going on. Language is one of the sinews that hold humanity together. So part of this miracle of the tongues has to do with breaking down the barriers that exist between people because of language. Today God has provided a unity that could not have existed without this miracle. As the text tells us there were a bunch of people from various places speaking their native languages who were now able to hear the message of the Gospel in the way that they could best understand. But as miraculous and wonderful as this is I would argue that the unity happened long before everyone started hearing things in their own native language. And for a better understanding of what I mean by this let’s look at our reading from Romans. In it we hear, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

The unity that we learn about which comes through the disciples communicating with everyone in their own language begins with the unity that is found in us all being children of God. The tongues of fire or divide tongues or whatever it is that you want to call them came as the result of the disciples submitting themselves to God and his perfect will. They were united because they took the gift that Christ offered. If they had all gone out and bought the first century Palestinian equivalent of Rosetta Stone and learned Phrygian and Pamphylian, Egyptian and so on, but forgotten to submit themselves to God, it would not have worked because it did not start with the unity that is found only in Christ. They got the order correct. That is what my long housing bubble introduction was all about, remembering what comes first. If the same thing had happened but the disciples were not unified in their love for Christ, today would have turned out very differently, because what would they have talked about – the new aqueduct? And the reason for this focus today is because I feel that too often that we get the order wrong. We want the miracle without first preparing our hearts and minds.

If you are ever bored go and look at a job posting for clergy. For the most part these postings all follow a pretty predictable pattern. They will identify themselves as a diverse, vibrant and committed group who were looking for a rector who is a good preacher, communicator and who will...wait for it…grow the church especially among young families. Church growth is the holy grail of every rector search. But isn’t this simply confusing an output with an input, like home ownership being confused with a healthy economy? Churches want to grow which is fine, but if they want it to happen without doing the work that the Disciples did today, is there really a point? Church growth should be an output of a healthy church. And I don’t want to simply pick on the church growth fetish of so many. Rather I want to point out that in our spiritual life we are so often looking for the fruit without being willing to do the less than glamorous work. Sometimes the problem with our Sunday readings is they are taken a bit out of context. In the buildup to what happened today there are verses like Luke 24:52-53, which reads, “And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” In other words the disciples had been keeping their focus on God for a long time before today happened.

There was an expression that was popular a number of years ago often among guilty parents who would tell you that they did not spend quantities of time with their kids but the time they spent was quality time. But I don’t know that it can work that way. In my experience quality time is the outgrowth of the quantity. Just like a great athlete spends a lot more time in practice than they do in the actual event. The quality time that a great skier exhibits in a competition comes from the quantity of time that they spend in practice. It seems that those who are truly devout and truly devote themselves to God are the ones that see the miraculous because they are prepared to make use of it. Pick whatever you want and you will realize that if we have not taken the time to grow in our love for God anything miraculous is not going to do much good. A spiritually dead church that miraculously grew would still be a spiritually dead church just with more people there to experience nothing. And so while today is wonderful and in many ways marks the beginning of the Christian Church we must always start with what we heard of the Disciple in Luke when the disciples were, they were “continually in the temple blessing God.” Or if you want a summary from somewhere else Micah 6:8 gives us the place to start when he says, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”