

**Pentecost Sunday
May 23, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I am always impressed when I hear the reading ... in all these different languages ...from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles about that first Pentecost. It is a statement about just one of the levels of diversity in this small congregation. We often refer to these different languages as “foreign” languages, when really they are just non-English languages which are being spoken by the rich tapestry of people that make up this community.

Many of you are wearing something red today to remember this holy day in our calendar. The question this sermon attempts to address is this: “What is God trying to tell us ... here at St. Cyprian’s in 2021 ... what is God trying to tell us about Pentecost? Not just remembering something that happened ... or may not have happened ... two thousand years ago. But, how is it happening now in our midst? What language of the heart and soul do we hear that includes us, even when feel like we are living in an alien land?”

Pentecost comes from the Greek word “pentekostos,” meaning “fiftieth.” Pentecost was a Jewish festival called Shavout ... the Festival of Weeks ... celebrating the spring harvest. Shavout fell seven weeks and one day after Passover.

In the Pentecost story we heard this morning the author of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Holy Spirit descended on 120 believers in Jerusalem. The Spirit empowered them to testify to God's great deeds, emboldened the apostle Peter to preach to a befuddled crowd of Jewish skeptics, and drew three thousand converts in one day. It’s a story like no other, full of wild details that challenge the imagination ... tongues of fire ... rushing winds ... accusations of drunkenness.

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit,” the author writes, “and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” “At this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.”

As Christians, we place great stock in language ... in words. Like our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, we are a People of the Book. We love the creation stories of Genesis, in which God births the very cosmos into existence by speaking: “And God said ...” “In the beginning was the Word,” we read in John's dazzling poem about the Incarnation. On Sunday mornings, we profess our faith in the languages of liturgy, faith affirmations, prayers, and music. In short, we believe that language has power.

There are many who speak of Pentecost as the reversal of Babel, the Old Testament story in which God divided and scattered human communities by multiplying their languages. In fact, Pentecost didn't reverse Babel ... it blessed it. When the Holy Spirit came, she didn't restore humanity to a common language ... she declared all languages holy and equally worthy of God's stories. The Holy Spirit wove diversity and inclusiveness into the very fabric of the Church.

Those of you who speak more than one language might be the best equipped to grasp the importance of this divine declaration ... this miraculous weaving. We understand intuitively that a language holds far more than the sum of its grammar ... its vocabulary ... its syntax. Languages carry the full weight of their respective cultures, histories, psychologies, and spiritualities. To speak one language as opposed to another is to orient oneself differently in the world ... to see differently ... to hear differently ... to process and punctuate reality differently. Indeed, there is no such thing as a perfect translation.

If this is true, then what does it mean that the Holy Spirit empowered the first Christians to speak in an unmatched diversity of languages? Was God saying, in effect, that the Church, from its very inception, needed to honor the boundless variety and creativity of human voices? That God was calling this community of faith to proclaim the great deeds of God in every tongue ... not because multiculturalism is progressive and fashionable ... or because the Church is a "politically correct" institution ... but because God's deeds themselves demand such diverse articulation? Could it be that there is no single language on earth that can capture the fullness of God?

Here at St. Cyprian's the Lectors end each reading with an invitation, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people." The congregation responds with "Amen. Amen." "Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people" is an invitation tailor-made for Pentecost. It is about hearing our Holy Scriptures ... with all its nuances ... in such a way that we are each spiritually moved according to how we hear God's word.

This was a week of heavy violence in the land where that first Pentecost happened. The Israeli-Palestinian divide that seems to simmer most of the time exploded in street fighting around the Temple Mount, rockets raining down on Jerusalem from Hamas in Gaza, and retaliatory air strikes and bombing in the Gaza strip ... one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Children died ... landscapes crumbled to piles of rocks, and chaos governed the streets.

In India people are dying by the thousands each day of COVID-19. Oxygen and vaccines are being sold on the Black Market. There is no room for the sick in hospitals so they ... mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons ... lie gasping for breath in parking lots.

Closer to home, the United States is in a state of political and cultural gridlock so fierce, we seem to have no capacity to communicate across our differences. The consequences, whether they have to do with the COVID pandemic, climate change, racial justice, or economic disparity, are too numerous to count. For many of us, the temptation to retreat into our enclaves ... the

group that speaks our language ... is especially strong right now. We can't see outside of our social media bubbles. We've lost faith in the possibility of genuine dialogue.

This is precisely why we need Pentecost. What mattered on that first birthday of the church was not the rhetorical skills and the religious wisdom of the disciples. What mattered is that they followed Jesus's instruction to stay in one place ... to pray without ceasing ... and to wait for the Holy Spirit to come with power and do a new thing ... a new thing both in them and through them. What mattered was that the disciples ... stumbling and clueless as they so often were ... obeyed the prompting of the Spirit and allowed themselves to be transformed by the wind ... the fire ... the breath ... and the tongues of God. Everything else followed from that.

"Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people." Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people on Pentecost. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people around the world and right here ... in this country ... and this neighborhood ... today. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people. Amen. Amen.

So back to that first Pentecost. What the crowds found baffling was that God would choose to speak to them in their own mother-tongues. That God would welcome all these different people so intimately, with words and expressions hearkening back to their birthplaces ... their childhoods ... their beloved cities ... their home countries ... and their cultures of origin. It is as if to say, "This Spirit-drenched place, this fledgling community of faith ... this small band that was to become the Christian Church ... this new Body of Christ ... this is yours. You don't have to feel like outsiders here ... we speak your language. Come in. Come in and feel at home."

To speak and understand different languages cuts across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, denomination, and politics. And as you may have noticed I'm using the word "language" in a very broad way. Conservatives and progressives speak a different "language," even if in this country it sounds like English most of the time. Fox News speaks a different "language" than CNN. Republicans and Democrats speak a different language.

Whether we like it or not, this is what the Holy Spirit required of Jesus' frightened disciples on that first Pentecost. Essentially, the Holy Spirit was challenging that early community of faith to stop huddling in their version of sameness and safety ... to break out of their silos. To throw open their windows and doors. To feel the pressure of God's hand against their backs, pour themselves into the streets, and speak. When the Holy Spirit came, silence was no longer possible.

In the end, the Pentecost story required surrender on both sides. Those who spoke had to brave languages outside of their comfort zones. They had to risk vulnerability in the face of difference, and do so with no guarantee of welcome. They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them ... new words, strange words, scary words ... were nevertheless essential words ... words precisely ordained for the time and place they occupied.

Meanwhile, the crowds who listened had to take risks as well. They had to suspend disbelief ... drop their cherished defenses ... and opt for wonder instead of contempt. They had to widen their circles, and welcome strangers with odd accents into their midst. Not all of them managed it ... some sneered because they couldn't bear to be bewildered ... to have their neat categories of belonging and exclusion explode in their faces. Instead, like their ancestors at Babel, who scattered at the first sign of difference, they retreated into the well-worn narrative of denial ... "Nothing new is happening here. This isn't God. These are blubbing idiots who've had too much to drink."

But even in that atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism, some people spoke, and some people listened, and into those astonishing exchanges, God breathed fresh life. This is not about whether this wild story actually happened. Rather it is how this story can be our story ... our story today ... a story where some speak, and some listen ...and God breathes fresh life into those astonishing exchanges.

What is the Spirit saying to God's people? Maybe that we live in a world where words have become toxic, where the languages of our cherished "isms" threaten to divide and destroy us. Maybe the Spirit is saying to God's people that the troubles of our day cry out for the balm of a bold and creative Church willing to engage across barriers. Maybe what the Spirit is saying to God's people is that if we don't learn the art of speaking each other's languages, we'll burn ourselves down to ash.

It is no small thing that the Holy Spirit loosened tongues on that first Pentecost. In the face of difference, God compelled these people of faith to engage. Because here's the thing ... no matter how passionately I disagree with your opinions and beliefs, I cannot disagree with your experience. Once I have learned to hear and speak your story in the words that matter most to you, then my eyes are opened in a new way, and I see a fellow child of God. I now have concerns I never had before ... your concerns. I can no longer flourish at your expense ... I can no longer abandon you.

Can we hear what the Spirit is saying to us, God's people? God is doing something new. Yes, we can be a part of it. Pentecost tells us that God speaks all these different languages ... all these different languages of the heart and soul.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people. Amen. Amen.

Amen.