

**Pentecost Sunday  
May 20, 2018**

**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 Act 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 nation.

So ... this weekend ... a royal wedding ... a royal wedding with the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church preaching. The tragic news of yet another shooting at a school ... this one in Texas and ten people were killed. And, today is Pentecost. The task of trying to weave these events into a fabric is daunting ... but here goes. I'll begin with Pentecost.

Pentecost comes from the Greek word “pentekostos,” meaning “fiftieth.” Pentecost was a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest, and it also marked the revelation of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. In the Pentecost story the author 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."

Christians often speak of Pentecost as the reversal of Babel, the Old Testament story in which God divided and scattered human communities by multiplying their languages. But in fact, Pentecost didn't reverse Babel; it perfected and 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, vocabulary, and 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, hear differently, process and punctuate reality differently. 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.

The reports of Friday's school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas, are horrific and shockingly familiar. Our immediate reaction may be heartache and compassion for victims, families, and communities. However, in short time ... and in spite of the courageous voices of students calling us to accountability ... the conversation will more than likely ... once again ... fade into the background noise of our political and social diversions. Although we hear repeated claims from our elected leaders that everything possible will be done to make our schools and streets safe from gun violence, there is little, if anything, to show that they really mean it.

As people of faith, our first response to this tragedy of course is prayer ... prayer for those killed ... for their friends, families, teachers, and colleagues ... for their communities, and even for the perpetrator of this horrendous act. Prayer leads us to depend upon God for comfort and hope, and yet prayer also challenges us to open ourselves both to God's vision of a responsible and safe society, and the courage to act boldly to achieve it. If we take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we cannot accept Friday's shooting ... or any that will surely follow ... simply as part of a new reality. It is our calling and responsibility ... as people of faith ... always to work without ceasing toward a new reality. But first we must be able to hear those who are speaking a different language ... it may sound like English, but often the words mean different things.

"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 in this tragic shooting. Amen. Amen.

Then there was a royal wedding. Not just any royal wedding, but a royal wedding with the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church as the preacher. His sermon was simple. "God is love, and love is power." But this royal wedding was unusual in other ways as well. Meghan Markle

... now the Duchess of Sussex ... is the daughter of a Caucasian father whose ancestry includes English and Scottish royalty. And Meghan Markle is the daughter of an African American mother who is the descendant of Georgia slaves.

So, here in the face of the heirs of those who centuries ago profited mightily from a slave trade to the English colonies in America, a descendant of that slave trade married a royal. A descendant of the slave trade preached at her wedding as the highest cleric in the American branch of the Anglican Communion. And descendants of the slave trade sang their hearts out in a gospel choir. Yes, they spoke English, but their language was obviously different than the language of Britain upper crust.

“Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.” Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people in God’s church! Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people as the whole world watched! 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, too. 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 ... most of the time.

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. As Bishop Curry alluded to in his sermon yesterday ... they were on fire.

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.

Something happens when we speak each other's languages ... be they cultural, political, racial or liturgical. We experience the limits of our own perspectives. We learn curiosity. We discover that God's "great deeds" are far too nuanced for a single tongue, a single fluency.

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. From Day One, the call was to press in, linger, listen, and speak.

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 I have concerns I never had before. 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. We can be a part of it. As Bishop Curry said, "We can be on fire for the healing of the world."

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