

“Each one heard in their native language”
A Sermon by Rev. Ruth Ragovin
Pentecost Sunday, March 31, 2020



Das new Testament, yetzund recht grüntlich teutsch : Welchs allein Christum vnser Seligkeit, recht vnd klärlich leret : Mit gantz gelerten vnd richtigen Vorreden, vnd der schweristen Orteren kurtz, aber gut, Ausslegung. ~ Author: Luther, Martin, 1483-1546

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV) ~ *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”*

It was Pentecost Sunday at a church we previously served. Like so many other mainstream Disciples of Christ churches, they were somewhat cautious when it came to manifestations of the Holy Spirit. But it is also true that in Appalachia the charismatic speaking of tongues, prophecies, faith healings, and, occasionally, even the handling of snakes could be fairly commonplace. We had a handful of charismatics in our church and I grew to feel comfortable around them over time. Now as far as I know they didn't handle snakes but a few did speak in tongues, as do a few people at our church here in Murray. And, in keeping with our understanding of the scriptures (I Cor. 14), we agreed that there was a time and place for speaking in tongues but, given our tradition, it was not in the midst of corporate worship.

On this particular Sunday a young woman, whom I will call Susan, was to do the children's message. The children came forward, sat in the first few pews, and waited for her to begin. She had planned to read a children's story but then, all of a sudden, she was filled with the Spirit and, for the first time in her life, began speaking in tongues, shaking, and prophesying. She went on and on speaking in tongues. An elder ran to the back of the church and frantically motioned her to stop. But, in her ecstasy, she did not see him and probably wouldn't have complied anyway. And then a couple of other people in the church started speaking in tongues too.

My memory is that next a few children in the first pew started crying. Parents ran up to get their children. And then we began hearing that noise that all ministers dread: the heavy doors at the back of the church opening and slamming shut as people began leaving the church. I then went up to Susan and encouraged her to sit down. But it was too late for a number of people. We lost a couple of families from church that day. But my husband Pastor Russ' sermon that day on Pentecost was listened to much more carefully than it normally was! People wanted to find out what all of the business about the gift of the Holy Spirit that was given on Pentecost and speaking in tongues was all about.

Today we celebrate the Christian holiday of Pentecost, the "Birthday of the Church, when God throws a big party to which everyone—men and women, young and old, slave and free—is invited! Each of you is an important and respected guest at this party where there will be great gifts to be opened as we are invited to draw upon God's power given through the Holy Spirit to overcome the divisions of Babel and come together as a united people. To celebrate this important day, a number of our children are baking cakes or cupcakes, making party hats, and Sunday afternoon during their children's Zoom

gathering they will light the candles on their cakes and sing Happy Birthday to the universal church!

This day is named Pentecost after the Greek word for 50th, since it happened fifty days after the Sabbath on which Passover began. It celebrates the day that Jesus' disciples and others received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost might also be thought of as a kind of graduation party for Jesus' disciples as they received the spiritual power from on high that they would need to carry out his work in the world.

In our scripture lesson today we read that devout Jews ***“from every nation under heaven,”*** representing many different nationalities and cultures and languages, were gathering at the Temple in Jerusalem for the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, which celebrated the growth of new crops and the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. All Jewish men living within twenty miles of Jerusalem were required to travel to Jerusalem for this festival and other Jews from much further away came as well, often bringing their families with them. So imagine a big, crowded, lively multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual joyous religious celebration.

Today we find Jesus' disciples gathered together in one place. Why? Remember last week when we celebrated Jesus' Ascension when he was whooshed into the heavens? Before ascending into the heavens, Jesus blessed them and told them that they were to wait in Jerusalem until they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. He said: ***“I [Jesus] am sending upon you what my Father promised; so wait here in the city [of Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*** (Luke 24:49) So they waited in Jerusalem ***“with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”*** (Lk 24:53) So we find the disciples in a posture of expectant waiting as throngs of pilgrims assembled in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot.

And then a surprising thing happened! Acts 2:2 states that ***“Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.”*** While this seems like a bizarre scene to us today, back then what happened is so chock full of familiar Biblical symbolic imagery that all present would intuitively have known that what was happening was the fulfillment of prophecy and the occurrence that Jesus had asked them to wait in Jerusalem for.

The “*rush of violent wind*” evokes the image of God’s Spirit moving like a wind over the waters as told in the creation story in the book of Genesis (1:1-2). In addition to wind, **fire** is one of those primary cosmological signs or code words in the Bible pointing to God’s power as well as purification. We recall God speaking to Moses from a burning bush, the pillar of fire leading the fleeing Israelites through the wilderness, and the flame engulfed chariots over Elijah and Elisha. The disciples probably would have remembered the day when Jesus’ cousin, whom we call John the Baptist, told the crowd that gathered when he baptized Jesus that while John baptized with water, Jesus would baptize “*with the Holy Spirit and with fire*” (Lk 3:16; cf. Acts 2:38).

In our passage today (Acts 2:3) we have this very peculiar image of “*divided tongues of fire*” that rested on each of the disciples. I’ve always been puzzled what this was meant to signify and just this week I learned from Dr. Jana Childers, professor of Homiletics at San Francisco Theological Seminary, that “on a Roman coin of the first century, divided tongues of fire appear over the head of Caesar as a sign of royalty—even as a sign of divinity.” (FW, p. 19) The coin meant that Caesar was a son of God. Thus when the divided tongues of fire appeared above the heads of the disciples on Pentecost, this was the bestowal of divinity and power on them too.

But as fascinating as the symbolism of this divided tongues of fire is, what’s most amazing is that as a “tongue” rested on each of them a miracle of genuine understanding across barriers resulted. Acts 2:4 says that: *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.* When the disciples began speaking, each person in the crowd gathered around them heard them speaking to them in their own languages about God’s deeds of power. Acts 2:6 continues that: *at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.* Acts 2:7 tells us that they were then led to be “*amazed and astonished.*” Perhaps they were a little frightened as well by this manifestation of power. I know I would be if I were there! They reacted by saying: “*Are not all these speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language?*” (Acts 2:7-8)

What were those languages that are spoken of in the book of Acts? Scholars differ in their opinions and there have been sharply contested theological debates and even splits in the church over this. One group believes that these tongues were what is known as glossalalia, or the ecstatic utterances talked about in 1 Corinthians 14, otherwise known as a heavenly language or a prayer language, the kind of language Susan began speaking

during her children's message that is used in charismatic and Pentecostal churches today. Others disagree. They are adamant in their belief that the "other tongues" that poured forth from the disciples were easily identifiable foreign languages used by the people who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire.

I'm not going to enter into the debate today as to whether the "other languages" were the ecstatic utterings of glossalia or were foreign languages. I have no idea. What is important is the effect that these "other languages" had. And what stands out to me above all else in our passage today is not only that the disciples were enabled, through God's Holy Spirit moving through them, to speak, but that the crowds were able to hear! Today's scripture (Acts 2:6) emphasizes that "***each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.***" Communication or understanding is the process of both speaking and hearing. Pentecost is not only the miracle of speaking. It is also the miracle of hearing or listening. It is from both speaking and listening that understanding and unity have the potential of emerging.

It seems to me that more than anything right now we need to pray for God's Holy Spirit to help us to listen. We need to listen to God. We need to listen to the cries of Mother Earth. And, above all, we need to listen to each other. Really listen with our minds, hearts, and souls. We need to ask God to bestow on us anew that Pentecostal power of deep listening as if our very future depends on it. Because it likely does.

It occurs to me that we celebrate Pentecost at a time when funerals might be more appropriate than a birthday celebration. For was it not just last Sunday when, in a mock lynching, an effigy of our Governor Andy Beshear, with its implied threat of assassination, was hung right outside the windows where his children often played in the Governor's Mansion by members of the Three Percent militia group during a "Patriot Day 2nd Amendment Rally"? Are we not celebrating a birthday when just this past Thursday seven people were shot at a Louisville protest prompted by the killing of the 26-year-old emergency medical technician Breonna Taylor, by white police officers who entered her home in March. Are our hearts not filled with profound sorrow and righteous anger at the unjust murder of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis, followed by mass protests around our country? Are we not all sickened by the polarizing divisions in our country when we are facing the common enemy of Covid-19, which has become so politicized. And does not Pentecost call upon us to bridge the divisions among humans, and between humans and other species, thus bringing unity anew?

I wonder the extent to which our divisions partly result from our inability truly to hear people in their own ‘native languages’? For perhaps the term ‘native language’ doesn’t just refer to the linguistic languages people speak—English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, or even regional variations of these—but rather the native language of their soul and, perhaps even more precisely, the language of their deepest longings and fears.

What if the crowds that day heard the disciples, through the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking their soul’s native language so that their deepest beings were addressed. The dreams they had in their childhood that since had been squashed. Their fear of getting sick and not being able to afford to go to a doctor, not being taken care of in their old age, not being able to put food on the table or educate their children, not being able to worship freely, not being seen for who they were, not being respected or valued because of their gender, orientation, ethnicity, social status, religion, cultural backdrop, shape of their body. Their fear of going out jogging. But then, as the disciples addressed them they heard themselves suddenly being spoken to in the native language of their soul and addressed as God’s beloved child and saw everyone around them as such. Their ears opened. They heard. They understood. They felt united. Perhaps that is the greatest miracle of Pentecost! The miracle of listening ears rather than speaking tongues. Perhaps on Pentecost we might shift our attention away from the speaking of the disciples to the hearing of the crowd.

Pentecost, I believe, calls upon us not to much to seek charismatic gifts as to build bridges with others through compassionate listening. The kind of listening that calls upon us to be truly present with our full attention to the nuances of what is being said and also what is left unsaid as we silence our cell phones and get rid of distractions as an act of respect to the person we are attentive to. The kind of listening that asks us to grow up and get over ourselves as we set aside our thoughts, our views, our egos to focus on another’s thoughts, feelings, and situations, without any pre-judgment as we attempt to experience the world through the eyes and hearts and minds of someone else, including and especially the people we may not agree with.

Compassionate listening challenges us to restrain ourselves from inserting our own stories or agendas into theirs as we hear others in their own native language rather than imposing our language on theirs. Compassionate listening is not about sharing what we know but rather listening another person into greater self awareness. For how can we ever expect others to understand us and see another point of view if they themselves do not first feel themselves to have been understood? To have been heard?

This weekend we might consider anew Martin Luther King Jr's powerful statement that "a riot is the language of the unheard," as we see protestors in major cities all across our nation on the streets, shouting out their anger, burning buildings, looting. Would this have happened if people felt they had been heard?

In a world marked by pain, division, and acts of cruelty and hatred sometimes there are no words that can make things better. Then we are simply called to listen deeply as people share their stories, to let them know that they are indeed heard. Yet that listening is a profoundly precious and sacred gift we can offer.

Margaret Wheatley shared the following experience: "Once a young black South African woman was sitting in a circle of women from many nations, sharing her story of horror when she found her grandparents slaughtered in their village. Many of the women were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain, they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix, to make it better, anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up, as if to push back their desire to help. She said: "I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me." (Margaret Wheatley, "Listening as Healing," *Shambala Sun*, December 2001.)

Right now many of our brothers and sisters around our nation and world are hurting and they just need us to listen. They need to be heard. Without doubt we are called to concrete and carefully considered acts of mercy and justice as we partner with God to build God's Kingdom on earth. But our actions must be always be guided by the understanding we gain by hearing the native language of the soul of others as they also hear ours. Pentecostal power can bring to those who seek it the miracle of listening ears that can lead to the healing of our divided and hurting world. And, as an unexpected byproduct, I wouldn't be at all surprised if when you listen you might suddenly begin to see divided tongues of fire dancing above them as you realize that they too are beloved children of our loving God!

So this day of Pentecost, I simply challenge you to go out into the world and listen. Listen to God. Listen to the heartbeat of our Mother Earth. And listen to each other.

Let us pray: Spirit of the Living God, I pray that you might fall afresh on each of us, filling us with your power to listen to the minds and hearts of all those around us so that we might be instruments of your healing in this divided and hurting world. Amen.