

A Pentecost 5.31.20

Acts 2:1-21

Focus Statement: The Spirit empowers us to share the good news.

During this Staying Home. Staying Safe time, one of the things I've been doing to stay busy is trying to improve my Spanish. When I finally get to see Delgadina again, I'd really like to be able to say more to her than good morning. Unfortunately, since I'm learning Spanish through a free online Spanish app, at this point were I to run into Delgadina, the two phrases I have are "good morning" and "I would like a cheese sandwich." So how helpful that will be is questionable. But anyway, improve Spanish is just one of the many fun, stay home, stay safe, save lives, quarantine projects I've been working on these last few months.

I got to thinking about this, because speaking in different languages is what often comes to mind when we read this Acts reading on Pentecost. Well, violent rushing winds, tongues of fire, and whether the disciples were day drinking, but also languages. When I was little, my home church would often do this thing that's pretty common on Pentecost, where they would try to find as many people as they could to read the Acts reading in as many languages as they could. For some reason, my mother always volunteered me to read the lesson in Swedish. Fun fact: Name with multiple silent j's notwithstanding, I don't speak Swedish. Not a word of it. The only things I can say in Swedish are "welcome," "thanks for coming," and "where is the bank?" The last one because I once tried to learn Swedish using those "Learn a new language" cassette tapes. But I was like eight and didn't have the attention span to get past the first sentence. I can also sing the Swedish happy birthday song, albeit with questionable pronunciation. The point is, most of my childhood Pentecosts included me sharing a reading which neither my audience, nor me, understood.

Which is almost comically antithetical to the entire point of Pentecost. Because what happened on Pentecost is basically the exact opposite of that. What happened on Pentecost is that everyone understood in their own native language. Not that everyone learned the disciple's language, or even that the disciples learned others, but that through the Holy Spirit, everyone was able to hear in their language. I think I've used the example of the babel fish from Douglas Adams "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" before, the little fish that lives in your ear and can translate every language directly into your ear.

I actually hate to use the babel fish analogy, even though it's a good one, because of another common comparison of Pentecost as sort of an undoing of the tower of babel. Maybe you remember that weird Genesis story where once upon a time everyone spoke the same language and thus, hypothetically, lived in peace and harmony. I say hypothetically, because going by the Genesis time scale, the first murder occurred when there were four people on earth, all of whom were related. Oh, and this is chapter eleven, and God had felt the need to wipe the whole thing clean and start over by chapter five, so clearly we humans didn't start out with the greatest track record of getting along. But anyway, in the Babel story, humanity decided to "make a name for ourselves" by building a giant tower to heaven. Why we decided this was a good idea is up for discussion but as I already pointed out, good ideas maybe not always one of our gifts as humans. So we did this, and God decided we were showing too much organization and decided to scatter us across the face of the earth and give us all different languages so that we wouldn't be able to work together anymore. This is a weird story, and I'm not going to try to get into it, because, quite frankly, it doesn't make sense to me either. The point of sharing it is this, sometimes the Pentecost

story gets cast as the undoing of the Babel story. Once we were spread out, unable to communicate. But now, with the Holy Spirit, we are “one body and one Spirit,” as Paul wrote in Ephesians, “just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

All of that is true, but not in the undoing of the Tower of Babel way. Because what happened at Pentecost is not that the people were able to hear one message. What happened is the Spirit was able to change the means of communication so that it worked for all people. Pentecost is the day when the church became adaptable, when it learned to meet people where the people were at. As we heard Tish read in the reading, “in our own native languages we heard them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” The message, God’s deeds of power, didn’t change. But the way that message was communicated was unique for each different person. The Pentecost reading is a lifting up of the beauty, and importance, of diversity, and the need to meet people where they are, not where we are, in order to share the good news of the kingdom of God.

Now, to be clear, this wasn’t a new thing. This was what Jesus had been teaching and preaching all along, when he ate with sinners and outcasts, called fishermen as his followers and taught them to be shepherds, taught as easily in the streets as he did in the synagogues and temples, and generally went wherever and to whoever he came to, to share the love of God with them. But what happens at Pentecost is with the coming of the Spirit, that ability reaches hyperdrive. No longer is it confined to one man, as it was when the Word had taken on flesh. Instead, that gift, as Jesus had promised, lives in each and every

one of his followers, so that now we are the ones who take on that work of meeting people where they are at, to meet the needs that they had, and with the message that they can understand. The oneness of God, the words we heard Jesus pray last week, that we” may be one as the Father and [Jesus] are one” is not a prayer for sameness. One of my colleagues pointed out last week that in the creation story, God did not call creation made in God’s image to be “very good” until it was very diverse. The image of God is in the diversity of creation, in the things that fly and the things that swim, the stars and the soil, and people of all backgrounds, genders, and experiences.

Here’s something else I found interesting about this Acts reading this week. Especially in this time in which the church is open virtually, and what it means to worship together is so very different than what we are used to. The reading starts out “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Then we hear how the Spirit “like the rush of a violent wind... filled the entire house where they were sitting.” I’ve always thought of that as being about how the Spirit comes to the community rather than the individual. I still think that, but here’s where this gets cool. Because of the “in one place” and “whole house” references, I’d always thought of this story taking place amid a group gathered together in a physical space, like the disciples in the room with the locked doors from Easter. But here’s the new thing I learned. My friend Jonathan shared with me, without citation, I admit, so I cannot tell you the source to look it up, but Jonathan shared that he’d heard that the list of places Jeff rattled off, “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judean and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,” and so on. That list of countries probably sounded as weird to its original hearers as it does to us. Because that list has

some outdated countries in it. It would be if the Battle Creek International Festival, in addition to having people from Japan, Mexico, Jamaica, and Burma, also had like Vikings or Romans or Philistines. People for whom the time period is wrong. Here's why this is cool, and important. If the people who are hearing from the disciples about God's deeds of power in their own native language are from a different time period, then the message of the Holy Spirit is not bound by time or space. Then the message of the Holy Spirit, the power of the Holy Spirit to translate God's love, is a power for us. It also reminds me of what I always knew to be true, but certainly appreciate the affirmation, of how important and powerful this thing that we are doing is in this time and place of pandemic social distancing.

One of the thing that's been so moving to me during this pandemic is how we the church have adapted on the fly to best serve our neighbors and continue to be church together, even when we cannot be together. We churches have maybe not done this as well as teachers, but teachers are ninjas, lets be clear. If America's teachers weren't so busy educating America's future, I feel like we could just turn the whole response over to them and they'd have us all vaccinated, standing in neat lines six feet apart, and not hitting our neighbors with our masks, but I digress. The point is, we've adapted, and how we've adapted has been different from church to church depending on what the need is. At Trinity we're doing this Facebook Live thing, St. Peter has Youtube worship, my parents are going to church on Zoom. Some congregations up north where the infection rates are lower, are trying parking lot worship. Also, we had a major environmental catastrophe last week with all the flooding, and you know who's there already, standing six feet apart and

wearing masks to muck out houses and make sure emergency stations have the supplies they need, we are. The church is there. Friends, this is what it means to be “all together in one place.” It doesn’t mean to be physically in one space. It doesn’t mean to be all together in one language. I don’t even think it means to be all together in one idea. It means to be all together in the mission of God, a mission of sharing the love of God across time and space, in ways as diverse as creation itself, for all of creation is required for the image of God to be made clear. So friends, on this Pentecost, we are apart, and so much more together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.