

May 20, 2018
First Christian Church, Greensboro
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Learning to Speak
Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-21

I wonder what it sounded like when they all realized that they could understand each other.

I imagine them all talking at once, moving around the room shaking hands and introducing each other -- all these people from all these different countries. All getting to know each other in a way they couldn't before because now they could hear and understand each other...

Pentecost Sunday is one of the high holy days of the church year -- it doesn't get the fanfare of Easter or Christmas, but it's an important day. "Pente" comes from the number 50: it's the 50th day since Easter; today marks the end of the Easter season and heads us into ordinary time.

Pentecost in the Christian tradition is a reinterpretation of a Jewish holiday, called Shavout, or the Festival of Weeks -- that's why they were all in Jerusalem that day, why they'd come from all over the place, it was to worship and mark this festival day.

So it was a holiday, but one they'd all celebrated before. But then this amazing thing happens -- the mighty wind and the tongues of fire and they can understand each other...

Sometimes we call it the birthday of the church -- it's the coming of the Holy Spirit -- you might remember that when Jesus ascends to heaven (we talked about that last week) and sends the disciples back to Jerusalem to continue the work, he tells them to wait there until the Spirit comes, that the spirit will give them the power to do the work he's given them to do...

Well, he was right - this is it. The spirit sweeps in when they're all gathered from all these different places and suddenly they can understand each other...

And it's not, of course, that they all start speaking the same language -- it's that they can hear what the other person is saying.

There was this great debate on the internet this week about a certain audio recording in which a disembodied voice was saying either the word "Laurel" or the word "Yanny." Did anybody else follow this?

If you remember the debate a few years ago over the dress that was either black and blue or white and gold - same thing. It was just this recording with one word repeated over and over and some people swore they heard the word "laurel," and other people -- listening to exactly the same thing -- thought they heard "yanny."

Raise your hand if you heard this recording. If you thought it was yanny raise your hand.... If you thought it was laurel? Hmm. Interesting.

There's some kind of scientific explanation involving frequency and pitch and recording...
But isn't that fascinating how we can hear something so differently?

I listened to it with my kids and asked them what they heard -- I didn't tell them about it first. I just had them listen, and when Jonathan heard it, I said "What did you hear?" And he said "Ewie?" He didn't know there were just two choices -- he didn't know it had to be either Laurel or Yanny, so why couldn't it be Ewie?

Isn't that fascinating? How we hear what we're conditioned to hear?
And if we think there's only two choices, then we're going to hear one of those?
How often is that true in life -- in politics or in any social issue -- you're either for it or against it, there's only two choices and you have to pick one....

But what if we were listening with completely fresh ears... what if hadn't already decided what we were going to hear -- what would we hear then?

What if, when the spirit rushes in, we could put aside everything we thought we knew, everything we've already decided -- what if, when the spirit rushes in, we could listen with completely fresh ears?

I think about Josie, whose baby dedication we celebrated today -- and Keegan and Nola and all the babies among us these days -- and how pretty soon they're going to be learning to talk. Right now they're practicing. They know their parents' voices and they're listening hard, and they're making their little mouths make noises that will pretty soon form into words, and about the language they will learn....

And I think about the promises we made to Josie today -- that we would surround her and her family with love and care and support, that we will teach her the way of Jesus -- that's about helping her learn the language.

And she is listening with really fresh ears, ready to hear.

I spent some time at the Greensbro Bound literary festival yesterday, hearing several writers talk about their craft. I love to hear writers talk about writing. And consistently, whether they were talking about adult fiction or non fiction or children's books... inevitably they would talk about language, and how important words are.

(Michael Parker, a novelist and short story writer, said, “Our job as writers is to wring the poetry out of everyday speech...” Isn’t that lovely?)

But they all talked about how important language is -- that language is often tied to place or to people, that language has the power to create worlds.

Think about Narnia or Hogwarts or Mitford or Middle Earth or Castle Rock... ... Language can create a whole new world.

And language builds our world too -- the words we use and the way we speak to each other -- that’s how we build the world we want to live in.

My friend Bromleigh says that a rule in her house growing up was that they always had to speak kindly to each other. Even if they were mad, even if they got in trouble, they had to speak kindly to each other. And if one of them lost their temper and spoke angrily or rudely, the other would say: “You may not speak to me that way.”

The way we talk to each other matters. And the words we use when we talk to each other and about each other matters.

It matters, and we should pay attention, when people in positions of power, who are supposed to be role models to us, who ought to be teaching us to speak kindly to one another -- use words like our president did this week when he called a group of people animals -- they’re not people, he said; they’re animals.

And when that happens, we ought to say: You may not speak to me that way.

You may not speak to us that way.

You may not speak about our brothers and sisters that way.

Because when we talk about each other like that, if we do it enough, then we forget that we are talking about people. And that affects how we treat people, how we live with each other, the world we live in...

Because our words build our world.

See: What the spirit did at Pentecost with the rush of the wind and the tongues of fire was to reveal the humanity in each person gathered there.

Because now they could each speak and they could each hear and they could understand that even though they’d come from

Mesopotamia, or Judea or Cappadocia or Persia or Egypt or Libya

Or Syria

Or Mexico

Or Haiti

Or Congo

That they were bound together in a common humanity
By a common spirit
That didn't take away their differences
But brought them together for a common purpose

And they could say to each other: hello, and welcome.

And isn't that the world we want to build?

It matters, the words we use.

That's why it matters that after church today, we're being invited as a congregation to affirm a statement that says, in no uncertain words, that we all are welcome here. That we affirm the humanity in each person. That each person is a beloved child of God.

It matters that we say that because
We promised Josie today that we would surround her with our love and
That we would teach her the way of God

And the way of God is the way of welcome
The way of God is the way of the spirit that
That affirms all our differences
And binds us together in our humanity.

Friends, this is our challenge and our invitation:
To hear the rush of the mighty wind
To feel the tongues of flame
To listen with fresh ears to the voices in our midst
To speak carefully and clearly about who we are and who God is
To proclaim the good news that the spirit of God is alive and among us here.

That's the good news we celebrate each week when we gather at the communion table where the feast of bread and cup have been made ready, and all are welcome. Come, beloved people of God: let us come to the table of our Lord.