

God-bledygook (A Jumble of Words)

Texts: Acts 2:1-21; (Genesis 11:1-9); 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
5/31/2020

Obviously, this is not the sermon that I had planned to preach today. Today, we wanted to be celebrating the birthday of the church. Today, we wanted to be celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit. Today, we wanted to be filled with hope and joy at what God has done.

But instead, we look around at our country and we see violence and despair everywhere. We see anger and bitterness and hatred spilling over into the streets. We see the seeds of division grown into full blown division with a ripe harvest.

Once again, the issues of race and violence have interjected themselves into our lives, in the middle of a pandemic, in a year of discontent.

It seems like we are hopelessly divided against each other.

But on this day, our readings speak to a deeper truth beneath the division which we see all around us.

This is still the day of Pentecost, a day when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to overcome the divisions that exist between people, and to offer a message of salvation with people who desperately needed to hear it.

Now, to begin with, it's the story of a church that was in hiding, too scared to share the good news that they had with anyone else, not doing its job. They were all gathered together with the conviction that God had acted in the world, but were too afraid to go out to tell anyone what God's message was.

It literally took fire and wind to get the early church off their butts and out doing the work God had set for them.

But once they got going, God was really there to help them. The text tells us that people from all over the known world heard the disciples speaking in their own language. In spite of all their differences, in spite of the barrier of speaking a different language, everyone could hear the message spoken to them in a way that they could understand.

Usually we see the day of Pentecost as a kind of miracle of speaking, where the disciples were empowered to speak in all different languages to get the message of God's love for us in Jesus out to the world.

But that's not what the text says, not what's really going on here. It's not that the disciples are being enabled to *speak* different languages. The text says that people from all over were empowered to *hear* what God was saying through the disciples in a way that they could understand.

It was more a miracle of hearing than it was of speaking. And perhaps that's where we should begin, with hearing rather than with speaking.

It was Martin Luther King Jr, speaking in 1967, two years after the Watts riots, who said, *“In the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?”*

So if we are to have a miracle of hearing today, to match the miracle of hearing on Pentecost, what is it that we should hear?

It's clearly the sounds of a nation in distress. The black citizens of the United States, joined by sympathetic whites, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and many others, have finally decided that an intolerable situation couldn't be tolerated anymore, and have said, “Enough.”

Black people have been killed by police for wearing a hoodie, holding a toy gun, having a taillight out, sitting in their own apartment, lying on the ground with their hands up, looking out the window of their home to see what the noise outside was, selling cigarettes outside, and for defending their home from an unknown assailant who had burst in with guns, but who happened to be police officers.

White people recently stormed the Michigan Legislature fully armed and nothing happened to them. White people parade through malls with assault weapons and nothing happens to them. White people appear at Subway with a grenade launcher, and no one calls the police.

What America is failing to hear is the cry of distress from some of its citizens to the unequal and unfair treatment they are receiving at the hands of their fellow citizens.

This has been happening for a long time, and when black people have protested by taking a knee at a football game, they have not only not been listened to, but have been attacked by whites as being unpatriotic, and have been blacklisted out of the league because some white fans didn't want to be confronted even by a non-violent protest against police violence.

So we definitely need a miracle of hearing today, so that we can understand the despair and the hopelessness of a group of people who have never had a fair shake in society, and who too often get blamed for the situation society has put them in.

Jane Elliott, who is white, once spoke to an assembly of white people (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yrg7vV4a5o>). She said, “I want every white person

in this room who would be happy to be treated as this society in general treats our black citizens, if you as a white person would be happy to receive the same treatment as our black citizens do in this society, please stand. (No one stood up) You didn't understand the direction. If you white folks want to be treated the way blacks are in this society, stand up. Nobody's standing here. That says very plainly that you know what's happening, you know you don't want it for you. I want to know why you're so willing to accept it or to allow it to happen for others."

If we can get the miracle of hearing from Pentecost, the next miracle we need is the miracle of speaking. The white church has too often whispered its dissent from this situation if it has spoken at all. We are like those early Christians, sitting in our upper room, waiting for God to do something, and literally needing the Holy Spirit to come with fire and wind and drive us into action.

Our black brothers and sisters in Christ need us to speak up, to join them, not in rioting and violence, but in a protest against the violence and discrimination that they are too often subjected to. Like Peter on Pentecost, we need to speak up, to say "Enough is enough" and to declare that we are allies in the fight for justice and fairness. Until enough of us speak up and say, "We will work for change because we recognize your full humanity," it's difficult to tell people for whom the system isn't working at all not to try to overthrow the system.

Our contemporary reading spoke the truth that the day of Pentecost was an undoing of the story of the Tower of Babel. Underlying that story is a vision of a humanity that says that, at its heart, at its origin, there is ultimately only one humanity. The author of the Tower of Babel story is saying that, underneath all our seeming differences of language and culture and skin color and geography, if we go back far enough in time, humans are one.

And the day of Pentecost shows God beginning to overcome those divisions of humanity through the breaching of the language barrier, through people hearing each other, hearing the message of God's love for all people, of every nation and every race.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy spoke to the pain of America at that moment of terrible division. He said, *What we need in the United States is not division. what we need in the United States is not hatred. What we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but love and wisdom and compassion toward one another, a feeling of justice to those who still suffer in our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.*

And then he said, *My favorite poet was [Aeschylus](#). He once wrote, "And even in our sleep, ^[SEP]pain which cannot forget^[SEP] falls drop by drop upon the heart,^[SEP] until in our own despair, ^[SEP]against our will,^[SEP] comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."*

It is my prayer that on this day of pain, and despair, which is also the day of Pentecost, we might find, through the awful grace of God, perhaps against our will, the wisdom which we need to go forward.

Amen