

## Sermon for Sunday, May 27, 2012 Pentecost Sunday Acts 2:1-21 "Hear"

How did you feel when we read that passage from the Acts of the Apostles a few minutes ago? Randy read it in English, of course, but overlaid on his rendition were passages spoken in Spanish by Gail, German by Lynne, Lingala – an African trade language – by Doug, and Greek by me.

Was it confusing? A little bit, I'll bet. It's a hard thing when there are crunches and clashes of different languages. And we only used five languages. Imagine what it might have been like if all the languages represented in the Acts passage were spoken simultaneously. I think there were at least 15 different language possibilities among the nationalities listed.

But what happened in that small room, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them all, was not a cacophony of different languages competing for the ears of the group. They all understood their conversation with each other regardless of their native tongue. It wasn't a sudden implantation of the Rosetta Stone software in their brains, it was the Spirit.

And the intriguing thing was not that the disciples could speak each other's languages, it was that they could hear whatever was said in their own language. In their own language!

It was as if, when Doug was speaking Lingala to you, even though you don't speak Lingala, you could understand what he said. And when I was reading in ancient Greek, you could understand what I said. And if Anita stood up right now and began speaking to you in Hungarian or Korean, you'd get it perfectly. It wasn't the gift of speech. It was the gift of listening. And that may have been yet another example of the Spirit's great wisdom.

Because language gets us into trouble. Those of us who have said a harsh or teasing word to another thoughtlessly and then have seen the pain we have wrought know that all too well. And mix in the complications of another language, and the opportunity for Massive Fail goes up exponentially.

It seems that every year, we hear stories of attempts to translate on the fly that get people into trouble. Chevy offered a model a while back called the Nova. Remember it? Well, it didn't sell too well in Spanish-speaking countries, where the name was way too close to "no va," or "no go." Ford didn't do much better with its Fiera, which translates as "ugly old woman" in Spanish-speaking Latin America. And in China, the KFC slogan "finger-lickin' good" was translated as "eat your fingers off." Not too appetizing!

So it was a good thing that the miracle wasn't in the speaking, it was in the hearing.

Now, that's not saying that we don't get into trouble with our hearing. Ask any man whose wife says, "how do I look in this outfit?" If he doesn't say the simplest and safest thing, which is as my husband says "you always look great to me," whatever he says is ripe for misinterpretation. If he says, "I like the blue dress better," his wife might say "so you don't like this one?" If he says, "it makes you look ten years younger," she'll say, "so you thinks I look old!"

Hearing is a problem, too... but it is also the place where we have the most potent opportunities.

Think of what Pentecost is...it's the birth of the church, when they all can talk together, share the things they learned from Jesus, figure out how to do the ministry they were charged by Jesus to carry out. And I have no doubt that they all had their own ideas, priorities, agendas. Each of them may have thought that they were the only ones who truly understood what the Messiah had taught them...and until now they had no way to communicate.

But now they could hear each other, truly hear each other. And so it was possible to join in conversation across all those cultural differences, religious practice differences, priorities differences.

Note again, that the focus is on hearing.

Why? Because only when we hear can we have constructive dialogue. If all we are doing is talking, and not listening, we're not going to get anywhere.

My mother used to say "you have two ears and one mouth, so you should listen twice as much as you talk."

It sounds like God was adhering to the same principle, giving people the gift of being able to hear each other.

I cannot imagine a time when we need to return to that gift more than today.

It seems we have lost our ability to hear each other, especially when we speak different languages. And we do speak different languages, even if we all speak English! If we are lawyers, we speak one language, the language of the laws and the courts, with decisions about plaintiffs and defendants, who is right and who is wrong. If we are small business people, we speak another language: access to capital, how to advertise, negotiating with suppliers, satisfying customers. If we are teachers, we speak the language of teachers, expressing our concern for the children with whom we work and the families from which they come, worrying about SOLs and about IEPs. If we are clergy, we speak the language of liturgy and pastoral care and spiritual formation, thinking about what will feed our flock, how to deal with folks who are unhappy with us, which way we can stretch the day to get to visit those who cannot come to church, and what we will preach on next Sunday. Different languages.

It doesn't take a linguistics scholar to recognize that people who speak different languages, even if they have at least a little facility with another language, struggle when they have to deal with each other. At the very least, if we can hear and understand what the other person is saying, we've got a good starting point.

And if hearing is our strength, we are more likely to pay close attention to what the other person says.

One of the greatest skills we can exercise if we are trying to come to a place of mutual respect with someone who differs from us is to be able to listen. Just listen, and hear what the other person is saying. Because hearing what they say is the critical first step in a dialogue across our differences.

And yet we live in a society where we are urged to avoid listening to someone or some group whose opinions don't match ours. We are encouraged to demonize rather than to listen. And in the coming months, we will see that played out in its most brutal form in the coming elections. The television is already saturated with advertisements telling us not to listen to the other candidate – that all they say is lies. Doesn't matter what they say. Doesn't matter that even if you disagree with much of that candidate's positions, there might be some common ground between you...none of that matters. Don't listen. Because heaven forbid you might find some common ground!

And yet one of the first things our Creator gave to the newborn church of Christ was the ability to really hear each other. And in the first months and years of that church, there were many times when the leaders disagreed about matters both logistical and theological...remember the battle between Peter and Paul about whether Christians needed to be circumcised before they could be baptized into Christ? And yet they came to a place of peace after some long and slightly heated conversations. That gift of the Holy Spirit which was implanted in them at Pentecost gave them the ability to not just argue across their differences. It gave them the ability to hear each other without immediately dismissing them out of hand.

They found that common ground, because they ended up doing just what my mother said: "You've got two ears and one mouth so you should listen twice as much as you talk."

In this time of hardening of the hearts, of the forces of darkness telling us we should not listen to the other, can we regain some of that beautiful gift of Pentecost? Open your ears. Listen. Hear. And then be willing to open your heart with the love of Christ as you enter into conversation with those who believe differently from you. You don't have to convert them to your position. That's God's job, if it is meant to be. Just use the gift that was given to you – to us all – on Pentecost, and hear. Amen.