

Acts 2:1-21

June 9, 2019

Pentecost Sunday

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, 10Phrygia 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?" 13But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

14But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Listen. Close your eyes and listen. Just for a moment. Keep them closed and listen

What do you hear?

Listen.

Do you hear the cars outside?

Do you hear the fans from the air conditioner?

What else do you hear?

Do you hear the kids?

Listen.

What do you hear?

For so long I have thought that Pentecost is about speaking. It's the miracle of the disciples speaking in other languages, right? In that way it is the birthday of the Church, it's when the Spirit descended upon the disciples in the upper room and they were given the gift of speaking in other languages so that all the visitors to Jerusalem during that holiday could hear the good news of Jesus in their own language.

Wouldn't it be great if we all did speak a common language? Wouldn't it be great to be able to understand one another and not have to struggle to understand each other? According to the eleventh chapter of Genesis, it used to be like that, and then human beings got too proud and decided again that they could be like God, even building a tower to the heavens. Of course that's the story of when God stepped in and confused their languages so that we couldn't understand each other. That's the legend of Babel and how come we have so many different languages. I've always thought that Pentecost was a beautiful reversal of Babel. Going from the confusion of languages to a miracle where everyone understood the good news that the disciples were preaching is an elegant way to inaugurate the church. But that's not really what happens, is it? Pentecost is not a reversal of Babel. If it were, the miracle would have been in the hearers, that all of a sudden we could all understand each other's languages. But as John Wesley has commented, "The miracle was not in the ears of the hearers, (as some have unaccountably supposed,) but in the mouth of the speakers. And this family praising God together, with the tongues of all the world, was an earnest that the whole world should in due time praise God in their various tongues." The miracle of Pentecost was not that we could all now understand each other, but that we could all hear the good news in our own languages.

It may be that God does not want to undo what happened at Babel. Years ago, when Erin and I were in Germany we discovered that it is a struggle to understand each other. I don't know any German other than "sprecken ze English?" But lots of places cater to tourists and have English menus at restaurants

or at least menus with pictures. But once we were in a smaller town at a restaurant where they didn't have English menus and the waitress didn't speak any English, we had to struggle to understand each other. We had to point, and shrug our shoulders to ask what an item was, we had to pull out guidebooks and guess that the phrases we were trying to say were being understood in her ears. We're supposed to struggle—we're supposed to work at trying to understand each other, whether we speak the same language or not—we're supposed to discover that we need each other. "God meets us in the messiness of different languages and does not ask us to speak God's language. Instead, God chooses to speak our many languages." Do you understand another language? How about the language of your spouse or your children or your parents? You may use the same words, but don't we all have to work to really understand each other? Don't we constantly misunderstand each other and we have to work at restating what we might have once said to make sure our loved ones understand what we *really* meant? Don't we have to try to put aside our own assumptions to listen what another is saying, to watch how they are speaking, and to hear their tone of voice, if we want to understand what they are really trying to communicate? The miracle of Pentecost would be that we could make ourselves understood to people vastly different from us. That's what the church should be—people vastly different from each other, English speakers and not, liberals and conservatives, of all races and ethnicities, of all levels of physical and mental abilities, of every gender and orientation, all of us coming together because we have heard God speaking in our own languages, we have heard God speaking to each of us.

But before we get there, before the miracle of Pentecost can happen, we have to listen. That's why I had you listen before. If you noticed in the scripture reading, the disciples are gathered first in the upper room where they have been for much of the time since Jesus was arrested and crucified. But we are told that as they were there, "suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." Before they went out in the streets and began speaking and preaching, they listened to the Spirit. The Spirit filled the house like the rush of a

wind. When you listened before did you hear the Spirit? Did you hear the noises of the world outside the church, calling us out, calling us to serve, to work, to care for God's world? Did you hear the noises of this old building? Calling us to care for God's house, to make a safe place for God's people? Did you hear the children? Reminding us of our baptismal vows, calling us to love one another as the first commandment of Christ? Did you hear your own breath, your own heart? Calling us once again to be grateful for the life God has given us? Did you listen? What did you hear? What did the Spirit say to you? The faithful church listens before it speaks.