

Pentecost – Year C

“⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

This story has often been taught as God stepping in to thwart humanity so that they might not become “like gods.” But when I chewed on this story again this year, what came to me is that it is a story of God trying desperately to save us from ourselves. The aims of the people in the story were to reach “the heavens” far away – and to make a name for themselves and thus keep from being scattered. In other words, they wanted to get to heaven, and they wanted to keep the identity they had. And both of those are bad ideas.

I say they are bad ideas, because if heaven is somewhere we have to build a tower to reach, we’ve missed the message God has given us in Jesus, who repeatedly tells us that the kingdom of heaven, the place where God dwells, is right here with us. And if our goal is to keep what we have, just as it is, we will never be open to the Spirit of God who we heard in Revelation tell us, “See, I am doing something new! – I am making all things new.”

When I looked at the Genesis reading in that light, it also shed new light on the reading from Acts, that writer’s version of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the amazing thing in that Pentecost event is *not* that the disciples were speaking many languages – but that they were speaking in a language that the people could recognize and understand. The spirit gave them the courage and ability to go outside themselves, to speak in a language that the ‘foreigners’ could understand and recognize and feel at home with.

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ... in *our own languages* we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.”

Amy Oden, a professor of early Church history, puts it this way: “This gift of the Holy Spirit that marks the birth of the church is a gift expressly for those outside the Jesus movement, those who had lived displaced in a language-world not their own. We cannot miss this! It is a spiritual gift given not for the disciples themselves, but for the outsiders listening.”ⁱ

For the outsiders listening. They would not have heard the Good News of God in Christ if Peter and the others had only spoken in their own tongue. Had the disciples – like the builders of the tower of Babel – been concerned only about reaching heaven, keeping what they had and sticking together, the Good News of God in Christ would never have reached other ears. It was in their openness to this Spirit of God present within them, that they could go outside themselves and speak the language of others so that they, too, might hear good news.

Peter realizes that this outpouring of the spirit is what God promised through the prophet Joel:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young shall see visions,
and your old shall dream dreams.

Again, Amy Oden says, “The Jesus community, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, challenges existing religious norms just as Joel did. These dreams and visions turn the Jesus community outward, proclamation through outsiders’ mother tongues.”

I think we each know how comforting it can be – if we’re in a place or with people foreign to us – to hear someone speaking our own language, or to be served a food that reminds us of home. We gravitate toward the familiar, because it makes us feel like we can belong. When Sr. Linda-Susan’s dad, Stan, moved in and lived with us for 5 years, it was important to me that he feel really welcomed and not just tolerated – so I learned to watch Lawrence Welk and to *fry* chops instead of grilling them. Speaking in another person’s native tongue – using another’s “language” is a way of inclusion that allows them to know they are *really* welcome. And it also stretches us beyond our boundaries, perhaps even our comfort zone.

Amy Oden suggests we ponder a question: What is the language of those outside these walls? What is the language of those to whom we are sent by the Spirit on this Pentecost to welcome? “Perhaps,” she says, “perhaps the native language of those outside your circle of Jesus followers is the language of science or music. Or perhaps it is a particular spiritual dialect, a language of the heart that speaks deeply into people’s lives. Can we ask the Holy Spirit to gift us with such native languages?”

So once again, dear friends, we are invited by God to go beyond our boundaries. As a community, you did this some 13 years ago when you called Wayne to serve as rector here, welcoming Harry with him. I wear this rainbow stole today, on Pride Sunday, for them. You opened yourselves, were willing to learn and speak a new language, and the kingdom of God was enriched for all of us.

As we hold Wayne and Harry in our prayer, let it be with hearts trusting in the words of Jesus that ended today’s Gospel: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” And let us pray for them and ourselves the words of today’s (alternate) Collect: “O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort.” Amen.

- [Genesis 11:1-9](#) [Acts 2:1-21](#) [John 14:8-17, \(25-27\)](#) [Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)

ⁱ Amy G. Oden, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4077