

Day of Pentecost *We become the stories we tell*
Acts 2:1-11; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

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May 24, 2015

Problem in the Text

Happy Pentecost! Well, as they might have said it on that first Day of Pentecost: Skibbible awakanaka hollablast! Just kidding – that is a glossolalia joke. I have great respect, deep respect for speaking in tongues as a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. I just know that it is a bit of a touchy subject in our traditions at Grace Church. Actually, I have experienced the phenomenon of glossolalia, of witnessing people speaking in tongues. This was at a church near Norfolk back in the 1990s. I was present when a circle of folk gathered around a seated woman, a missionary visitor from Bolivia. They had asked if they could pray for her and ask a blessing for her ministry to the orphans and street children of La Paz. Everyone was laying hands upon this woman and praying and then they were speaking in tongues. That would have been strange enough for me but, it got weirder. Then I began to interpret to the seated woman what the people were saying to her and praying for her – in Spanish. I was speaking fluently in Spanish to her and I understood all of the voices, the cacophony of whispers and shouts that filled the air. I felt a profound sense of deep connection between me and each of the people praying, that their words came straight from their hearts to mine, skipping between us on currents that felt like electricity.

Speaking in tongues has become problematic among us Christians because there are sects that demand it as a sign and as proof of the Spirit at work. Frankly, I have a hard time believing that the Spirit will show up at 10:00am each Sunday morning just because the people there demand it. The Holy Spirit is not just about speaking in tongues. That many languages came out of the mouths of the Apostles and were clearly understood by the native speakers who heard was a sign that the Spirit was present on the first Pentecost. The event was a sign that this connection between Jesus and the Father was now shared with everyone. As Luke wrote in the Acts of the Apostles: “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” The Advocate whom Jesus promised to send to the disciples had declared itself to “many nations.”

Problem in the World:

The incident of many tongues spoken on Pentecost was proof that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to all of humanity. Jesus was not to be glorified to just the Jews, he was to be glorified to all peoples. Lovely. All good. Hooray, Jesus is for us! But that begs the question, who is taking the message out to the world these days? There has been a lot in the media recently about the demise of the Church and even Christianity in the news recently. I have heard headlines that shout at me, “Islam will overtake Christianity in numbers of believers by 2050.” I’ve read that “studies show more people in the USA say they are not Christian than ever before.” From CNN, “Millennials leaving church in droves, study says.” The Pew Research Center is really reliable in sounding the death-knell for Christianity. If you want to get really doom and gloom while sipping your coffee, read their latest on Pew Forum.org, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow*. The funny thing is, that as much as I am sure that the reports are not false, I think the headlines are highly exaggerated and meant to stir up anxiety in us. The world tells us we are failing. The world wants to focus on the aspects of the church that prove it is broken and limited and fractured and weak. The world wants us the focus of our narrative on faith to be the many ways the church is dying. There is a quote you may have heard that says, “We become the stories we tell.” Is what the world is feeding us the story we want to tell?

Grace in the Text

Let’s get back to speaking in tongues. What was said in many ways to many people on Pentecost was recognizable and carried the same message of the Gospel to the native speakers who heard it. There was a

purpose to the event that filled those present with the wonder of the power of this new *connection* between humanity and God – an invitation to relationship. The language of God had been in the tongue of the Hebrews – all communication to His Chosen People and all worship in the Temple in Jerusalem – the language of holiness had been Hebrew for all of the history of the Jews. As we heard in today’s Gospel lesson from St. John, Jesus told his disciples that the Advocate, or the helper he was sending, ‘will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’ The message from the Advocate was made personally, directly and to each person present in the large crowd in the best way for each of them to receive it – in their native tongue. The Holy Spirit gave the Apostles the power to speak clearly and equipped them with the ability to reach everybody. The Spirit gave them the power to proclaim the glory of Jesus Christ to the astonished crowd. The Holy Spirit was doing what Jesus promised the disciples in the St. John’s Gospel to “prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.”

Grace in the World

How do we get the message of Pentecost out to the world? I don’t want you to get nervous, but I think the answer is speaking in tongues and I think God is asking you personally to trust Him on this, not Mother Leslie. But please stay with me for a little longer... On Thursday the Virginia Seminary graduated the class of 2015. If you ever are feeling down about the future of the church, you just need to attend one of these and hear about the newly minted Divinity grads who will serve in the church as both lay and ordained – they are gifted and amazing! What I wanted to raise with you today is from the commence address given by the Rt. Rev. Jeffery Lee, the 12th bishop of Chicago.ⁱ In his speech, Bishop Jeffrey reflected upon some trends he has noticed in the Diocese of Chicago. His diocese reflects the broad range of styles of worship, size of parish, and diversity in the wider Episcopal Church today. He has discerned that the parishes that are thriving in his diocese all have three major things in common, even though each parish is different: high or low, traditional or contemporary, urban or rural, conservative or liberal. First, the thriving parishes are “crystal clear about their identity,” who they are and what they are about. Second, they are communities that “foster deep conversations about things that matter,” nurturing authentic spiritual growth. And third, they are parishes with heart at the clerical and lay and every level. They are engaged in their communities, they are confident in God, and they are filled with deep joy. These parishes take seriously “the death-defying love of Jesus Christ” and help each other along in their faith journeys.

I think we hit those marks here at Grace Church, but it is the third of the bishops’ points that I want to focus on with you today. Remember the saying, “We become the stories we tell.” We have a choice about the story we will tell about our faith and about our faith and our life here at Grace Church. And that brings me back to speaking in tongues. We each have a unique story to tell about our journey of faith. We each have a unique voice to add to the conversation and the questions we need to ask one another about things that matter. How do we nurture one another’s heart for Christ and take the news of that joy to our families, friends, and neighbors? By the power of the Holy Spirit we speak in tongues which will be instantly recognizable and received by those who hear it: we need to trust that the Holy Spirit is working in us to glorify Christ in our own place and time. Each of us has this unique voice which is authentic to our experience of Christ in the world. Pentecost reminds us that the evidence is in: the world is wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. The word wants us to feel divided and broken, but we have a story to tell of community, ministry, and healing. The world wants us to focus on our individuality and our desires. But we have a story to tell that we are not alone: by the Holy Spirit we are deeply connected to one another. The Holy Spirit is our invitation into relationship, forgiveness, and wholeness in God. Celebrating Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit will help us and use us to get the word out about the redeeming love of Jesus Christ in ways that people will understand. *That* is a worthy story to tell the world about ourselves!

Amen.

ⁱ The Rt. Rev. Jeffery D. Lee, Commencement Address to the Class of 2015 at the Virginia Theological Seminary, May 21, 2015.