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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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The Day of Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from Acts 2, verses 1-11

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

A Latin-American minister was touring the United States in an effort to boost financial support for missionaries and ministries in his home country. At a church luncheon he was telling the guests about his home country, his family and the important work being supported there. As he concluded he said, "I have a charming and understanding wife, but alas, no children." And after a pause he said haltingly, "You see, my wife is unbearable." Puzzled glances in the audience prompted him to try to clarify by saying, "What I mean is, my wife is inconceivable." Observing the laughter in the audience, he realized his mistake, but floundered into the intricacies of the English language by correcting triumphantly, "That is, my wife, she is impregnable!"

Of course, with our many dialects, even within this land, is it sometimes difficult to understand people of different regions. A New Yorker visited the home of a Kentucky business colleague. The wife introduced him to their lovely little daughter. "Her name is Marlon," said the proud mom, "after ma favorite movie star." The New Yorker asked, "You named your daughter after Marlon Brando?" "No, silly," said the mom, "I named her after Marlyn Monroe." (laughter)

It really helps if you can speak the language of the person with whom you are speaking. That's one of the things I love about the story of the first Pentecost that Sylvia read this morning. You know the story well. "When The Day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from the heavens and filled the whole house where they were sitting. And they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now they were staying in Jerusalem, God fearing Jews from every nation under heaven, and when they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked, 'Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of hears them in his own native language?'" Then follows a partial list of the nations which were represented that day; fifteen of them in all.

What an amazing event! I've often wondered whether this was a miracle of speaking, or a

miracle of hearing. Do these uneducated Galileans speak in all these different languages, or did they speak their own language and those listening by the guidance of the Holy Spirit simply hear the words in their own language? Either way, it was a marvelous miracle.

On The Day of Pentecost a group of Galileans were testifying and people from at least fifteen countries heard them speak in their own native tongue. Think about that for a moment. Think how difficult communication is, even among those who speak the same language. Communication is difficult even among people who share the same experiences. How many couples in counseling say, "We've lost the ability to communicate." And here on The Day of Pentecost we have people across the spectrum of languages and nationalities and experiences, understanding these humble messengers of God.

I think there is much we can learn from the first Pentecost. First of all, I believe, we see that the Christian faith is a universal faith. People from different nations understood the gospel message. Why? Because for one thing the message was meant for all nations and all peoples. Like all the people on earth, we in this land are somewhat ethnocentric. Ethnocentric is a fifty-cent word that means we think everybody in earth ought to be like us -- to look like us, to talk like us, to think like us, and we think God ought to favor us. After all, we are a Christian nation; at least in our own minds we are. I wonder what God thinks of us -- really. It shocks us when we realize that God is a universal God. Intellectually we understand that that's true, but at a more basic level we want a God who is very like us. Surely God speaks English as God's native tongue, surely God has western values. And then we meet a Christian from Africa or Asia or Europe who has very different ideas about God and it can be disturbing. We thought we had God in a box. There are wonderful Christian people in almost every nation in the world, and naturally they see the world through the lens of their own culture, and they think their way is best as well. We all surely give God a good laugh at our provincialism. God is a universal God. God is he God of the Chinese and the Congolese, of the Iraqis and the Afghans as well as the Canadians and the Americans. God has no favorites. What God favors is justice and righteousness and compassion and forgiveness and love -- wherever these characteristics are found.

I believe what God is seeking is the day when all of the world's people will know God's love and God's peace and will know themselves to be brothers and sisters in Jesus. The Christian faith is a universal faith, and that's the first thing I believe the passage this morning from Acts says to us. The second thing is it says that God comes to us just as we are. People from these many nations heard the gospel spoken directly to them in their own language; and that is critically important. Whoever we are, God speaks our language. We don't have to have a college degree to hear God speak to us. We don't have to speak English. We don't even have to speak or hear at all. God's language is the language of the heart. In fact, according to St. Paul, simple people may hear more clearly than those who are encumbered with many degrees.

In 1st Corinthians we read, "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law?"

Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” Then a little farther he writes, “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth, but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”

Now, I am not anti-intellectual. I believe with all my heart in the value of education, but we dare not think that God speaks only to the sophisticated. God speaks to even the simplest among us. God speaks to us where we are. That’s not only true of our intellectual differences, but it is true of our personality as well.

What a crazy question, but I’ll ask it anyway. Have you ever noticed that people are different? Some people are quite easy going. Some seem to get along with everybody they meet; nothing ever seems to ruffle them. Some other people are very precise; they want everything done just right. Some people are party animals. They are energized by being around other people. They like being in the limelight, and they make every event they participate in more enjoyable.

Then there are some people who like being in control. They are rather impatient with those who are not as action-oriented as they are. I heard about a woman who was the latter category. She liked being in control. She made life difficult for her husband Tom. The scary part was that she was becoming more domineering all the time, even to the point of Tom insisting she see a psychiatrist. After much pleading, she finally agreed to go, much to Tom’s surprise. After she came out of the office following an hour with the psychiatrist Tom asked, “How did it go, dear? Was it helpful?” “I’m not so sure,” she replied. “It took most of the hour to convince the doctor that the couch would look a whole lot better on the right instead of the left side of the door.” (laughter)

People are different. To a certain extent, that is the way God created us. It’s in our genetic code. Some of us are somewhat emotional; some of us are more intellectual. I’m convinced God speaks to engineers differently than God speaks to artist. Engineers need all the nuts and bolts of faith. Artists sense a bigger canvass. The point is that God comes to us where we are. God speaks our language. God speaks to us according to our own needs, and God uses different means to speak to us according to those means.

In worship some people respond to scripture, others to the liturgy, still others to the music and even a few to the sermon. People are different. Jesus came to St. Paul in a different way than he did to Simon Peter. The point is that God comes to us individually as well as corporately. God speaks to us according to our individual needs. God comes to us where we are. That -- that -- is the meaning of the incarnation. We cannot separate Pentecost from the entire Jesus event of Jesus’ birth and life and ministry and death and resurrection. In Jesus God entered

this world. Why? To draw close to humankind, to reveal to us God's real nature, to help us prepare for the coming kingdom. God came to us at Christmas in Jesus, and God came to us at Pentecost in the form of the Holy Spirit. God came speaking our language that we might know God and have life through God. Now, it is our mission to translate the gospel into language that our friends and neighbors can understand as well.

I believe there are people in this community who are waiting to hear the gospel in a language that they can understand. We dare not wait for them to learn our language. The language of words like incarnation and transfiguration -- those words mean nothing to lost souls. We need to translate the gospel into words and acts that no one can misunderstand. Words like love, compassion, forgiveness and acceptance. God speaks to us according to our needs. Let us speak to the world according to its needs as well.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs