

Day Of Pentecost May 23, 2010

Today is Pentecost. It's the day we celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit and, with that gift, the beginning of the life and ministry of the Church. So it's our birthday. It's a day especially about us, about who we are as the Church. Red is our color.

With that in mind, I want to pay some special attention to one part, a small part really, of that reading from the Book of Acts. These verses, (some of toughest to get through, good job,) tell Luke's version of the Day of Pentecost; and Luke takes great care to tell the story theologically. That is, every detail has meaning and significance beyond the historical. Every part is rooted in the whole story of the people of God—past, present, and future. The part I want to look at, the bit about the people hearing the disciples' words in several languages, is no exception.

Now, like I said in the Adult Class a couple of weeks ago, the biblical and theological context of this part of the Pentecost account is the story in Genesis 11 of the Tower of Babel. As you remember, Babel tells about how, way, way back in the "good old days" (when oil was over \$100 and before the market crashed), everything was great, and people had just one language and only a few words. So everyone could understand one another and get along and do all sorts of stuff together.

But then humanity pridefully overstepped itself—they built the city and the tower and all of that—so God punished their pride by giving them different languages and scattering them all over the world. The state of creation at the conclusion of the story of Babel wonderfully describes the human condition. This is how we are now—we are isolated and separated from each other; and we can't talk to each other as we should. Languages symbolize this. Intimacy requires communication.

Pentecost, the coming of God the Holy Spirit, is sort of a reversal of Babel. It's a moment in which those old wounds, those old separations and divisions and putting some folks in the good group and the rest in the bad group, these are, for an instant, healed; and the ancient divisions that classify us and isolate us begin to mend.

The people in the crowd at Pentecost represent the whole world, just like Babel did; and that difficult-to-pronounce list of places is really a catalogue of all the major nations located around the Mediterranean Sea at the time the Book of Acts was written.

So the first work of the Holy Spirit is that the damage done to the whole world at the Tower of Babel is prophetically overcome by God; and a taste of unity in the Good News of Jesus is given to everyone. In fact, such healing of divisions is what all of the work of the Holy Spirit is really about—it's the Spirit's job.

But notice this: notice that Babel isn't exactly reversed. That is, things are not restored to exactly the way they were back in the "good old days" before Babel. Do you see what was different?

To be sure, most every nation in that long list had its own language. But it's very likely that almost every person in that crowd spoke a good bit of Greek; and that many, if not all of them, could handle some Hebrew or Aramaic; and certainly a good majority were able (at least) to ask directions and order in a restaurant in Latin.

But the people in that crowd—all the people of the world—they didn't hear of the mighty works of God in some common language that they all knew. And they didn't hear of the mighty works of God in some new, universal, language—Esperanto, or English—that everyone was suddenly and miraculously able to understand. In fact, they didn't all hear the same words or the same language. Instead, each heard "in his own native language". Each heard in the first words learned, the most familiar words, the words most loaded with meaning, the words they knew most deeply, the words that had shaped their souls—they heard in words that were the fruit of Babel.

So two things happened at once. First, everybody heard the same Gospel. The base content, the core, was the same.

However, and at the same time, everybody also heard something different. Different people heard different words, different nuances and different details. There was unity, but there was also difference. It was the same, and it wasn't.

After all, languages aren't codes for one another; and to hear something in one language is not exactly the same thing as to hear it in another. This old saying is always true: 'he who translates, lies.' The differences matter.

Strangely, for one reason or another, it seems to be very important to God that we hear the Gospel (both literally and figuratively) in our own native language, through the distinctive filters and history of who we are, both individually and culturally. This is part of a sort of tightrope God walks with us. On the one hand, God wants us to be together, to be of one heart in his body. (I talked about that some last week.) But, and at the same time, God doesn't want us all to be exactly the same. God enjoys and respects our variety, our differences, all of the particularities and difficulties that are symbolized by our having so very many native languages. Maybe one of the reasons God gave us so many languages was that God got bored before Babel, and God thought that the full richness of what humanity could be needed some help.

So the Holy Spirit does not coerce sameness—we don't all hear in the same language; instead the spirit strives to hold together in a holy unity the variety and differences that God cherishes. This is hard. This is very hard; and it can threaten some of our most precious preconceptions.

Remember the folks in the early church in Jerusalem, the ones who *were there* for Pentecost and who saw and heard it all first-hand? Remember how, in a matter of months, these same folks were at each others throats over things like snobbishness language, and racism? Obviously, their very real differences managed to survive the experience of Pentecost.

From the beginning, being different has been no problem at all. It's staying together in the midst of these differences, that was (and is) very hard.

And things haven't changed all that much. I suspect that this is part of why it's so tempting for us to break apart, to split ourselves into all of these different denominations and groups and sub-groups. We hear the same Gospel differently because we *are* different; and so we live it out differently—too often thinking that we are the only ones who have it right, the only ones who heard the real words.

Here at St. Nick's we know about this up close and personal, as our Church and our communion continue to struggle with exactly that tension built into the Day of Pentecost—different languages, one Gospel. And we know how hard it can be when that tension snaps, and the worst of Babel emerges triumphant. And we wait and pray for another Pentecost; for the chance once again to learn what is God's gift of the Good News, and what is the background noise of our native languages.

Meanwhile, we walk the same tightrope that God walks, between unity and differences—we live together with variety, with ambiguity, with differences, and with our various native languages that sometimes seem to have very few words in common. It has been ever thus. Sometimes it's hard and sometimes it's glorious. This just seems just to be the way we are. But if it's good enough for God, it should be good enough for us.

And the word of God this Pentecost is that we are given God's own self, the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to draw us together, to nudge us toward a unity with integrity; to a shared life in the one faith in the midst our of differences. That is our promise and that is our hope. With that in mind, we can, perhaps, relax a bit and enjoy the great gifts of one another—both our different languages and our common faith. For the Spirit is with and among us, and we are being led, together, deeper and deeper into presence and the truth of God.

Native languages and all. REAFFIRM BAPTISMAL COVENANT