

Pentecost Year C  
June 9, 2019  
St. John's Cathedral

A few years back when I was on a month-long Holy land pilgrimage in Israel, our group visited Bethlehem and decided that our prayer that day would be to gather in a space below the floor of the Church of the Nativity -- the large church that commemorates the birth of Jesus-- and read the story of Jesus' birth. So on that day we took our Bibles and went down some steep stairs into what seemed like a small room and discovered that a lot of other people from a lot of other places had had that same idea.

We stepped into that warm, crowded room filled with voices reading the story of Jesus' birth in Spanish, Arabic, French, Italian, Japanese, English and a collection of other languages. It's hard to describe what that felt like other than it felt like we were all 'on the same page,' -- which we were quite literally as we read the same passage from Luke aloud. But there was some deeper connection as well --one that spoke to our oneness in Christ, even though we had never met before and probably would never meet again.

I remember thinking that day that it seemed like a Pentecost experience, even though our intention was Christmas.

Pentecost is a big deal. It is a major feast. Some call it the 'birthday of the church,' but sometimes it runs a poor third to Christmas and Easter in our days of great celebration and as far as I know, no one sells cards to celebrate the day. It can get lost in the tumult of end-of-school activities and the run-up to summer.

It is a wonderfully curious story from the Book of Acts that frames this for us as the Spirit descends on the disciples. The story begins when Jews from all over the region gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost – an early harvest festival. These were people who spoke a variety of languages from across the region.

As we heard, the disciples were all gathered in a room. I think that they might have been trying to figure out what to do next as Jesus' followers, since the risen Jesus had departed from them and left them with the responsibility to carry on. Likely they were wondering about the future. They might have even been a little bit fearful.

What came next was almost a sound and light show as the Holy Spirit showed up among them. A sound like a violent wind. Tongues that looked like fire rested on them. They began to speak in other languages. And all of those people from all of those hard-to-pronounce places like Phrygia and Pamphilia also understood what was being said—understood language that was not their own as if it were their native language. In a sense, they were all on the same page.

Needless to say, they were all asking what was going on—they were amazed and perplexed, Luke tells us. Some thought these folks had been drinking- that they were drunk. But in essence, they were simply drinking of the Spirit.

This is a story of power, of language, and of coming together in a new way. It's a story from a long time ago, but it is also a story for today. – and for tomorrow.

I've always been intrigued with the way the crowd that day understood what the disciples were saying as if they were speaking their own languages. If you've ever traveled to a place where you don't speak the language, you know how difficult and strange that can feel.

Life kind of goes on before you, but without narration. Conversations are challenging. It's hard to understand directions or read a menu. I can make my way through a Spanish-speaking country fairly well, kind of fake Italian and call on some college German, but was stymied by Turkish. The only word I knew with any confidence was the word for toast – and that's because the Turkish word for toast is – tost. You can't get very far with that. You can't build a relationship.

But certainly hearing and understanding languages has a deeper meaning in its context in this story from Acts. This is about a diverse crowd of people coming together with a mysterious sense of understanding – and possibly a way of appreciating – the other. The language barrier has been broken down. Making the way for other barriers to come down. This is the work of the Spirit bringing people together in a new community – in new ways and with a new power and mission.

Language is a powerful thing. It can both unite and divide. Sometimes we remember words spoken to us for years – even decades. Words of praise and appreciation – and words of discord or shame.

Sometimes it is easier to name what divides us than what unites us. Those places where we just don't communicate well for any number of reasons. Sometimes those divisions feel uncomfortable. We might avoid some topics at family gatherings – those divides that keep us apart. Keep us sometimes at arm's length.

Our clergy conference this year was about precaching 'across the divide' – which I took to mean preaching in a way that shares good news in a way that can be heard clearly and hopefully and helpfully by people on both sides of one or more of those divides.

Whether it is preaching, or simply considerate conversation, this could open our imaginations to new ways of being together-- embolden us to venture into new and risky conversations that lead to new relationships.

There are many kinds of divides that separate us besides language: socio-economic divides, cultural divides, racial divides, political divides, generational divides, theological divides that can be as challenging as having a big mountain range in our midst. How do you even begin a conversation?

One way to begin is to recall a baptismal promise that we will repeat together today: to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” Sometimes in that diverse neighborhood that we call humanity, that can be a challenge.

Often, though, it becomes a blessing. For a couple of years, a formerly homeless man has helped me with yard work. At some point his life simply went off the rails. He has a colorful history. Now he lives in a Catholic Charities apartment building that was built for the homeless, is a lay Franciscan and a fabulous gardener. I got to know him by driving him to our house and sometimes having a coffee break with him when he works. We have found a lot of common ground, even though our lives have taken quite different paths. His journey has without a doubt had more bumpy roads than mine. But we have a friendship across that particular divide.

I think we routinely underestimate the power and presence of the Spirit among us. That power that can break down barriers, heal our hearts and infuse us with a kind of holy energy. That power that can teach us the language of kindness and compassion, of truth-telling, of relationship-building.

The power of the Spirit at Pentecost is a wake-up call. It can shake us up. I've often quoted essayist Annie Dillard's comments on that power that suggests that "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews."

So hang on today!

This is also a great day to be baptized. And it's a great day for all of us to be a part of the baptisms that will be celebrated in a few minutes. In baptism we are 'sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever,' which is a powerful kind of belonging. We are brought close to God. This is a day to remember the power of the Spirit, binding us together as the Church, calling us to be the Church in new and creative ways, living as those deeply loved by God -- as we move into the future, and whatever that future may hold.