

Sermon: Year B, Feast of Pentecost – Baptism of Jackson Dunbar

Texts: Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:16-17; 16:4b-17

Today is Pentecost, which, along with Christmas, Easter, and All Saints Day is one of the primary feasts in our church year. It marks the descent of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and then, subsequently, to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem, and with this event the church came into being – the community of the faithful. And in many churches this morning, some part of the liturgy, most likely the Gospel, will be spoken in multiple languages: the original Greek, perhaps, maybe some Spanish, French, and German, whatever languages members of the congregation know – probably no Dutch.

This is done as an attempt, on a celebratory occasion, to bring some additional drama to the worship and to reproduce in a small way the surprise of that original Pentecost moment. There were so many people, so many different backgrounds and interests, so much diversity of language and purpose, and yet what the disciples said was heard by all as if it were addressed to each. Even today this should amaze us. Cultured people might say this was remarkable; others, more daring, might call it miraculous.

But it's worth asking what the true miracle was. By our common rendering of the event, our focus is turned to the speaking. Hearing one text read in various languages affords us the opportunity to experience human difference and to marvel at the richness of our own forms of speech, and, expanding from there, to be awed by the often unrecognized beauty of cultures other than our own. In this demonstration of multiculturalism, the church then joins a great chorus of others in our time who seek to engender a global sense of belonging among all peoples, built from respect, increased understanding, tolerance, and an empathy that stems from simple, shared humanity.

This work is important, and it's never finished. But I think that, ultimately, its emphasis drifts off-center from what that first day of Pentecost really disclosed and opened for us. For the miracle was not the nature of our speaking or the multiplicity of our languages. The miracle was rather one of hearing, which is very different. The crowds, Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, heard the disciples speaking, and what they heard, so it was reported, was their native tongue. The disciples were Galileans, but what they were saying somehow addressed everyone there, regardless of their background or their identity or their ethnicity. Everyone was being spoken to, compellingly, personally, and broadly. What was being said applied to all.

This was the principal drama, not the languages, but the message itself. It wasn't limited to one clan or another, it didn't draw distinctions and create divisions and separate out one group of people as the elect. The deeply astonishing mystery of Pentecost is that language itself, and all the rifts it names and creates, was suddenly transcended. The Spirit of God descended onto the disciples, and they, in turn, spoke in such a manner that what was heard was the one voice of God – the one voice of God which was foreign to no one. The key was the substance of what was said, not the form. It applied to all, both universally and intimately. This was what so astounded

the crowds. Truths that are broadly acknowledged tend to be trite, and those that sink deep tend to be singular and divisive. What can be said, then, that succeeds in profoundly bundling such breadth with such depth? This is the real point and the question of Pentecost. How are our words transformed so that what others hear from us is the one voice of God?

If today is a feast dedicated to the origin of the church, then, most appropriately, it's the nature of our message that should most occupy us. What do we have to say that can have the same effect, that stops people short, wonderfully, because they suddenly feel as if they are being addressed by God, in the comfort of their own natural tongue, no matter who they are? We ponder this too seldom, just as we yearn for the Holy Spirit too little. And as a result, the church becomes too much an institution built by division rather than being a community that mercifully heals them. In the effort to be true to the inheritance we have received and strong witnesses to God's passion and promise, we can too easily wield doctrines like clubs and make faith sound like threat instead of hope. And on the other hand, in the attempt to be open and inviting, what we often proclaim can sound merely shallow, offering only general clichés that have been given a Biblical twist.

It isn't enough for us today to wave flags or blow up balloons or celebrate this feast without concerted reflection, because we have been entrusted with a tremendous mystery, which always exceeds the scope of our own capabilities. It depends on the humility of letting God's word take precedence over our own, so that others, when encountering us, may believe that something of God has been made present to them too. That's an audacious claim, and its terribly dangerous as soon as we reduce faith strictly to believing the right things or following the right rules or falling in line with a system of faith that has all the right answers. And letting faith descend, then, to either banality or silence, which might seem safer, is just as dangerous in a world of restless conflict. This is why the Pentecost event is so important: our speaking must be an enticing, a most lovely persuasion, as if our words were in the native tongue of those to whom we speak.

How is this accomplished? The first work of the church is to listen, acutely, to God, to God who has addressed us all and addressed us individually in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He is God's word. And, in turn, our first word, then, is the echo of Christ's promise: in witness to what God has purposed, and then, in solidarity, in sacrifice, in service, and in the hope of joyful redemption. Our words should speak of always of God's generosity and hospitality, delivered with the prayer that the miracle is not our speaking, but what others hear when hearing us – the one voice of God addressed specifically to them, with utmost grace. This is the drama that should endlessly fascinate us – and others. If we dare...

Ken and Amy, I think it's accurate to say that Jackson has yet to master his own language: whether that will be English or Spanish or French or Creole or Swahili or Maori. But he has already been addressed by God, spoken to, by the word that is the one voice of God to all – the voice that declares reconciliation and a love that defeats every form of division and death. Baptism is the church's declaration that this word is our first language, always. May he be blessed, then, by the grace of becoming most eloquent, eloquent in what others hear when he speaks.

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