

The Feast of Pentecost
May 31, 2020
St. Paul's, Wilmington
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J Hanna

When I was in high school, I satisfied my foreign language requirement by taking German. It was an easy “A” for me. All I had to do was conjugate verbs, and diagram sentences. I also had to translate stories from German into English. Not only did I get straight “A’s,” I even won the German award at graduation, which was just a confirmation of what a nerd I am.

In order to satisfy the foreign language requirement in college, I also took German. I tested out of the first two years, but had to take two third year level courses.

I will never forget the first German class, when the professor burst through the door, got down on all fours, and started speaking in rapid fire German. “Fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt.” I didn’t remember that. I had to look it up. He was playing the character of Gregor in Franz Kafka’s novel, *Metamorphosis*, in which a child wakes up one morning to discover that he has been turned into a cock roach.

It was at that point, that I realized I didn’t really understand German at all. Sure, I knew a lot of German works; I knew a fair amount of German grammar, but I couldn’t really speak German. All I had accomplished was rote memorization.

Understanding language, any language, is the the keystone to effective communication. George Bernard Shaw said: “Great Britain and the United States are two nations separated by a common language.” We both speak English, but we aren’t always communicating.

The number one cause of divorce and other failed relationships in the family, the workplace, and in the church, is the inability, or unwillingness, to communicate. The Feast of Pentecost which we celebrate today is about our ability to communicate the life giving power and holiness of God to each other and to the world. The story of Pentecost is actually a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel found in Genesis, Chapter 11. You may remember that folks are trying to build a magnificent tower that reaches into heaven— it was to be a monument to themselves and their

achievements. It was a sign that they thought they didn't need God. Genesis tells us that God confused their language, so that they couldn't complete the project.

Unlike the Tower of Babel story, on the Day of Pentecost, the people of God become expert linguists. Rather than a vertical relationship with God, in which folks are trying to get to the top of the ladder and be God, Pentecost creates a horizontal relationship with God and among peoples of different races and tongues, and cultures— Galileans, Parthians and Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Phrygian and Pamphylia. They don't have a failure of communications. They may be speaking Hebrew, or Latin, Mandarin, or Urdu, or German, French, Spanish, or English, but they can understand each other. They are communicating. They begin working together for a common purpose. They are achieving together what they cannot achieve by themselves. The power of the Holy Spirit takes barriers and turns them into open gates. The power of the Holy Spirit takes what is broken and makes it whole.

The power of the Holy Spirit teaches us not to build towers in an effort to be our own Gods, but to build bridges that connect us to God's majesty, grace, forgiveness, and love. The good news of Pentecost is that in order to speak the language of faith, we don't have to spend long hours learning how to conjugate verbs, or diagram sentences. We have a powerful vocabulary—that can make us whole— words and phrases like Thank you. I'm sorry. I love you. I forgive you. I trust you. I honor you. I am praying for you. I will treat you with dignity and respect. I will work for justice and peace. The phrases are simple enough, but we are not really communicating, if we simply say them on our lips, but are not moved in our hearts to do them.

The events of recent days are a wake up call that we have hard work ahead of us. The wounds of systemic racism are not healing, they are festering. Too many of us have ignored the problem, and when you ignore a problem, it doesn't go away, it just gets worse. The murder of George Floyd in MN and the subsequent riots around the country, are understandable, but troubling and disheartening. Our lack of progress in creating a culture of equality and economic opportunity is a threat to the future of our democracy. We are creating a justice system that does not mete out equal justice for all. And that is maddening and shameful.

The promise of Pentecost is that God gives us a language of reconciliation and healing. Paul writes in First Corinthians that the Holy Spirit is given to us for the common good. The Spirit gives us wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, even the ability to work miracles. We all belong to that same Spirit, because we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, black or white, rich or poor, Republic or Democrat.

In today's reading from Acts, Paul quotes the prophet Joel— "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." There is such hope and promise in that line isn't there? That same Spirit that Joel foretold, came down on the apostles in the upper room when Jesus stood among them and said "Peace be with you." Wholeness, completeness be with you. That same Spirit came down on Pentecost, with gifts needed to create a beloved community. That same Spirit is here today in this place. That same Spirit empowers us to create the beloved community. That same Spirit seeks my soul and yours to change the world. We have the power to change the world. May God's Holy Spirit give us the grace we need to accomplish it. Amen.