

Day of Pentecost

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SPEAKING OF THE SPIRIT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Seven years ago, in May 2013, some of my Davidson College buddies planned a “mini-reunion” for the thirteen of us who lived together in a house our senior year. The reunion was scheduled for a weekend in June, when I was going to be in Lusaka, Zambia, teaching New Testament Greek to students at Justo Mwale Theological University. While I was very excited to travel to Zambia, I was also very disappointed to miss seeing my college friends. When I sent my regrets via email and explained to the guys why I wouldn’t be there, one of them responded, “Let me get this straight. A Georgia boy who lives in North Carolina is going to Zambia to teach Greek in English to a bunch of African students for whom English is not their first language. Is that right?” I wrote back, “David, you’re exactly right! And let’s hope nothing gets lost in translation!” By the grace of God and thanks to the graciousness and patience of the students, we had three productive weeks of learning Greek. However, to be perfectly honest, even though we all spoke English, I’m not sure we always understood everything each other said.

That story came to mind as I read again the account of God’s Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples on Pentecost. This Pentecost story is often described as a “miracle of hearing,” because “devout Jews from every nation under heaven . . . heard [the disciples] speaking in the native language of each.” The hearers themselves even comment, “And how is it that in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power?” (Acts 2:8, 11)

But, to state the obvious, you can’t hear what somebody has to say without that person speaking. So, while the emphasis is sometimes placed on the miraculous hearing in this Pentecost story, it’s important to recognize the miracle of speaking that takes place – “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2:4) That sounds a lot like Paul’s description of the spiritual gifts – “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:7-8)

In a day and age when we are bombarded with words and speech and communication has never been easier and faster, it’s sadly true that, even if we are speaking the same language, we often talk right past each other. We’re too eager to say what we have to say to listen to what the other person is saying. You might even be relieved when you finally hear someone say, “Now you’re speaking my language!” because you know that means you share and/or understand the other person’s

opinions, values, beliefs, tastes, etc. which helps you communicate fluently.

Our son, Jackson, is a furniture designer in New York City. Since the end of March he has been at home with us. Fortunately, he is able to do his work from Wallace. The other day he asked me if I could print a document for him. When I handed him the four-page document (which was a collection of detailed renderings of a piece of furniture), he asked me if I had looked at it. I said, “Yes, but it was like trying to understand a foreign language!” He laughed and said, “Yeah, I guess so,” and then he explained the diagrams to me and how he uses them in his work.

Again, to state the obvious, speaking and hearing are crucial to understanding one another. If we know how true that is in our everyday lives, we ought not to be surprised that it is just as true in our witness to our Lord Jesus Christ. What good is it if we speak about God’s deeds of power but we don’t speak in a way so that people will say, “They’re speaking my language”? Over the years, visitors and new members here at WPC have given good feedback about the “code language” that we use in our church. I think about folks telling me, “It was months before I finally got up the nerve to ask somebody to tell me what PDT, Kirkwood, PEP, the Currie Building, PW, etc., etc. were!”

That’s good advice. In the same way, how do we speak about God’s deeds of power in language that is not cryptic, coded, and familiar only to those in the know in the church? The story of Pentecost suggests that it’s a matter of speaking of the Spirit – that is, not only speaking **about** God’s deeds of power through the Spirit, but allowing God’s Holy Spirit to speak **through** us. As Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians about the spiritual gifts, “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3)

In Romans 8:26, the apostle Paul writes, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness: for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” That sounds similar to what Jesus told his disciples when he sent them out to proclaim the good news. He knew they would encounter resistance because of the message they proclaimed about God’s deeds of power. So, Jesus assured them, “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” (Matthew 10:19-20)

That’s good advice for us as the people of God who are called to share the good news of God’s deeds of power. If we will get out of the Spirit’s way, we will find that God can and will speak to us and through us in ways that will lead people to say, “They’re speaking my language!”

As I prepared this sermon, I read a moving story from a minister named Jim Callahan. He shared it twenty years ago in his reflections on this Pentecost story. It goes like this: “There has been one event in my life in which I came close to apprehending the wonder of Pentecost. It occurred during the solemnest of priestly obligations. For over a year I had been the custodian of the ashes of a child in my

parish who had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The father was a Frenchman who wished to have his son's ashes interred in his family cemetery in eastern France, near Dijon. I agreed to bring the ashes there and to hold the service with his family and friends. The cemetery dated back some 600 years. The family was predominantly Roman Catholic, and few of them spoke English. Leaden gray clouds hovered over the ancient burial ground. A light mist of rain made us bring out umbrellas. A great slab of stone was rolled back to allow me to enter the underground vault.

“I stammered my way through the liturgy, and the gathered friends and family were more than courteous and gracious, though the only French I felt confident about was *jus d'orange* and *merci*, neither of which I could manage to work into the service. The grandmother of the child stunned me when she thanked me for ‘the mess’ I had made. Her daughters-in-law quickly explained that this was the French for “mass.”

“It was a time of great healing for the parents and their devoted family and friends. Afterward, we went to a 400-year-old inn and had lunch, which turned into a French wake, with joy and camaraderie and love flowing as freely as the wine. ***I didn't understand a word they were saying, but I understood what was being said.***¹

I have had similar experiences on my trips to Tabasco in southeastern Mexico. While I am nowhere close to being fluent in Spanish, I did try hard to learn some so I could speak with and hear our partners in Tabasco. I discovered that I had a very hard time understanding voices on the radio and TV. However, when I worshiped in different churches, I knew what was going on. As the pastor said about his experience in France, “I didn't understand a word they were saying, but I understood what was being said.” I had a similar experience in Zambia in 2018, when I told the students in my Greek class I was leaving early to head back to North Carolina to ride out Hurricane Florence with Nancy and the rest of you. Almost immediately one of the students said, “Let us pray.” We all stood in a circle, and the students covered me in prayers and song. All of them were praying and singing. The voices blended together so beautifully, and yet it was hard to distinguish if they were speaking in English or their tribal tongues. Nevertheless, although I didn't understand a word they were saying, I understood what was being said.

That's the Holy Spirit at work! That's the story of Pentecost in action! We Presbyterians are sometimes criticized for being too wordy in our faith and our worship. “Why, just look at your Sunday bulletin!” someone might say. “Look at all of those words! You need to let the Spirit move!” Well, we serve a God who has always spoken and who continues to speak to us and – amazingly – ***through*** us.

- Genesis 1:3 – Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.
- Isaiah 6:8-9 – Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” And he said, “Go and say to this people. . .”
- John 1:1, 14 – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”
- Romans 10:14-15 – But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”
- Hebrews 1:1-2 – Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

Someone has remarked that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who have something to say and those who have to say something. While the latter description is not particularly flattering, I wonder if, in the very best sense, both descriptions don’t apply to us as followers of Jesus Christ. We have something to say about God’s deeds of power. And we have to say something, for that is our calling as God’s people.

The good news and promise of this Day of Pentecost is that we serve a God who speaks to us and through us by the Holy Spirit and makes known the promise of salvation. It’s not our job to control and tame God’s Holy Spirit (as if we could!) or to make judgments about how God is at work in the world. Our job is to be faithful to our calling, to bear witness to how God is at work through the Holy Spirit, and to speak of the Spirit in such a way that people might hear us and say, “They’re speaking our language!”

Let us pray: God of grace and gift; we thank and praise you for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Holy Spirit, enlighten our thinking, strengthen our will, guide us and give us courage that we may serve God our Father by living faithfully where we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹ Jim Callahan, “Windblown: Acts 2:1-11,” May 24, 2000 at www.christiancentury.org/article//windblown.