

“SPEAKING OUR LANGUAGE”

Acts 2:1-21

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There's a revolution going on! Did you know that? “Revolution” means “change,” and there are some changes taking place in our world that are mind boggling, almost overwhelming. Recently, Rev. Bogre, Rev. Steiger and I attended the Large Church Initiative in San Antonio, Texas. There we saw a short video, available on *YouTube* that chronicles the revolution that is taking place in communications: the growth of social media on the Internet. Are you aware that if Facebook was a country, it would be the fourth largest country in the world? Did you know that last year one in eight couples in the United States met online? Did you know that Ashton Kutcher and Ellen Degeneres have more fans on Twitter than the combined population of Ireland, Norway and Panama?

A while back our Youth Director, Curt Campbell, joined Facebook in order to better communicate with our youth. Now he sends all the youth ministry plans to the youth, not only by e-mail, but also by Facebook. To keep up with what is going on, we pastors joined Facebook, too, although none of us spend much time on it. We were told at the church where we were meeting in San Antonio, that the kids in that area use Twitter more than Facebook or e-mail these days. In fact, there were signs telling us to Tweet during our lectures and workshops at the Conference! If you don't know what I'm talking about, don't panic! I haven't learned how to Tweet either!

My point is that there is a whole new way of communicating that didn't exist a few short years ago. We are now able to be connected in ways that heretofore were impossible. When my niece was deployed to Iraq, my mother learned how to use the Internet, and it was a blessing for both of them. When our granddaughter was born in South Carolina two days before Christmas, we were able to see pictures of her here in Cleveland within a few minutes of her birth.

With the power to communicate also comes the power to misuse this new and wonderful technology, as we are all well aware. New laws concerning privacy, libel and character assassination are being written because of the proliferation of social media. Indeed, it is almost impossible to pick up the *Plain Dealer* or watch television news without hearing of some problem regarding the proper use of cell phones or the Internet.

The focus of our seminar in San Antonio was to help us as pastors of large churches to communicate more effectively in the new world in which we are living. We now have people on our church staff who spend time updating our website, installing software on our computers and seeing that we are linked with the rest of the world. You can make donations and pay your pledge to Church of the Saviour online these days, just in case you were not aware of that, or you can have your weekly contributions deducted automatically from your bank account if you so

desire. You can also register your kids for Vacation Bible School on line, and we aren't even using paper forms this year to sign kids up for camp. The information and the forms are on the website.

Christians have always been in the communication business, because we believe in a God who seeks to communicate with us. One of the most marvelous revolutions in communication of all time happened on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection. Now Pentecost started as a Jewish harvest festival commemorating God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai, fifty days after the Exodus. But something happened that day which turned Pentecost into a major Christian holy day. For the Bible tells us that on that day the Holy Spirit came upon the assembled congregation, and suddenly everyone heard the Gospel message in his or her own language.

Jerusalem was a crossroads of the world in the first century. It was a center of commerce and trade. People from many countries lived there, speaking the language they brought with them from their native lands. The disciples had a wonderful story to tell. In fact, it was the best news anyone had ever heard. The early Christians proclaimed that because of the resurrection of Jesus new life was possible, not just someday when we die, but here and now, today! They wanted the whole world to know. But how could they communicate with those whose languages they did not know, and whose customs they did not understand?

We who speak English as our first language are somewhat spoiled, for English is the official language of 53 countries as well as the United Nations and other international agencies, and we are told that English is spoken by 1.8 billion people in the world. Yet we are well aware how difficult it is to communicate with people who don't speak the same language that we do. As our 90 X 90 project, my wife and I spent an evening at the Interfaith Center on Case Western Reserve's campus where United Protestant Campus Ministries has its office. We met with international students who are working to better understand the English language. They continue to be amazed at some of our idioms and strange figures of speech!

The miracle of Pentecost is that, somehow, on that day, every single person heard the disciples speaking in his or her native tongue! No one needed a translator. No one needed an interpreter. Everyone was able to hear the message about Jesus in words that he or she could comprehend. On that day, the church was born. On that day the disciples accurately and adequately communicated God's message of forgiveness and love to the world. According to one of the commentators, *"There is a real sense that this event marks a turning point in history. After this, things can never return to the way they once were. The promise for which the people have waited for so many generations is being fulfilled."* (1)

There are many facets to the story of Pentecost, and many lessons that can be learned from Acts, chapter two. On this Pentecost Sunday, as we celebration the confirmation of the faith of ten of our youth, I would like to lift up three things that I hope our confirmands, and all of us, will remember.

First of all, the story of Pentecost makes it clear that **the Gospel is for everyone**. Sometimes we unintentionally exclude people from our churches. A few years ago I led a workshop on "Assimilating New Members," and we used a checklist entitled, "Whom Do We Exclude?" If our building is not accessible, we unintentionally exclude those who cannot climb steps. If we have services only on Sunday or only in the morning, we exclude those who have to work on Sunday morning, and so on. You get the idea. Whom do we exclude at Church of the Saviour? God excludes no one. The story of the miracle of communication on Pentecost makes that quite clear. Every person could understand the message. **The Gospel is for everyone.**

I remember when I was in seminary and the Dean of the Chapel, Bob Hamill told those of us who were studying to become pastors, “It’s not your job to convert people,” he said. “God will do that. But it is your job to communicate the Gospel with such clarity that people will feel compelled to make a decision.” Now and then I will hear myself quoted, and that makes me feel good. But then, there are times when I hear myself misquoted. And I will think to myself, “I didn’t say that! How did he hear that? How did she get that out of what I said?” And I am reminded that I have not communicated effectively. There is an old saying, “The teacher has not taught if the student has not learned.” I am humbled by the reminder that the preacher has not preached unless the Gospel is communicated in such a way that people come to understand. I repeat: **the Gospel is for everyone**. We must communicate that message in such a way that no one is excluded or kept away.

Second, and I think this is so important to hear when you are in the eighth grade, as well as when you are a lot older than 12 or 13 or 14: **Diversity is good!** When we kids used to bemoan the fact that we weren’t as athletic as this person or as good looking as that one, my mom would say, “Be thankful God didn’t make us all alike. If God would have made all women alike, they all would have wanted to marry my husband!”

On the day of Pentecost, God did not cause everyone to speak the same language. God communicated in such a way that everyone heard the message in his or her own language. That’s a different story. The Gospel does not encourage uniformity of thinking and uniformity of expression. Rather diversity of thought is held up as the ideal. When we all think alike, there is nothing to stop us from hurtling at full speed down destructive paths. When there is no counterbalance, no diversity of opinion, there is no one to say, “No. Bad idea. Let’s not go there.” We have only to recall the Jim Jones tragedy of a few years ago, when 918 people living in an intentional community participated in a mass suicide, to be reminded that when everyone is encouraged to think alike, disaster becomes not only possible, but probable. There is a difference between following Jesus and blindly following the crowd. The Pentecost story celebrates the fact that everyone was able to communicate. It does not say that they all thought alike. We are not supposed to park our brains at the door when we come into the church for worship. Diversity of opinion is necessary if we are to grow in the faith and the knowledge and love of God.

Finally, the Pentecost story makes it clear that **Christ is our focus and our guide**. The gathered congregation at Pentecost was not there to follow Peter, even though he was the preacher of the day. Nor was the crowd simply left to its own devices, to fend for itself. The center, the unifying focus of the Pentecost experience was the resurrected Christ, who was the object of the early disciples’ worship and devotion, and who is to be the central focus of our church today. Though we may be a diverse group of people, though we may not think alike on many subjects, if our focus is on Christ, we will remain united in vision and in purpose. We must always remember that the leadership of the church does not reside ultimately with the bishop or the senior pastor or the Administrative Board, but with the spirit of Christ, who calls all of us to bold new ventures of faith with him.

In a recent article, Bishop William Willimon tells of seeing the great mosaic apse at the church in Monreale, Sicily, a wonder of the medieval world. He writes that the mosaic reminded him of the great expansive reach of God that is written about in Acts, chapter two. He describes the dazzling array of jewel-like depictions of the story of our salvation on the wall of that church. The mosaic depicts the Christ of the wide embrace, hands outstretched, reaching out from his majesty as if to encircle the whole church, the whole creation. Willimon writes that upon leaving

the church, a street vendor held up a trinket with Christ's picture stamped upon it. "Don't you want to take a little Jesus with you, mister?" he asked. Willimon commented, "No, we don't take Christ with us; he takes us places."⁽²⁾

That story reminds me of the little crosses that have a verse on them about having "a cross in my pocket." You see, we don't take Jesus around with us, as though he is a good luck charm. Nor should we imply that the faith is something that comes in a manageable size. The faith that we celebrate today, born on Pentecost, is a faith that moves mountains, changes lives and takes us places. Its focus is not on the church or any human person. Its focus is Christ, who calls us to follow, sometimes to places we never intended to go. But if we make Christ our focus, he will guide us and our church every step of the way.

Yes, on Pentecost God speaks our language. God assures us that **the Gospel is for everyone**, that no one is excluded. God affirms that **diversity is good**, and God reminds us that the **focus of our faith must be on Jesus**. We are called to follow him, not only on Pentecost, not only on the day we are confirmed, but every day of our lives.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the miracle of Pentecost! Help us to remember that your Gospel is for everyone, that diversity is good and that Jesus is the focus of our faith. Help us to communicate your message in all that we do and all that we say. Amen.

Notes:

1. Huffman, Ted. *Clergy Journal*. Vol. 86, No:3, p. 119
2. Willimon. William. *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 38. No. 2., p. 40.

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