

Pentecost, Year A
Acts 2: 1-21
May 12, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Speaking the Language of Pentecost:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Imagine the scene. Galileans hunkered down in an upper room. Disciples still reeling with grief and loss. Constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Waiting for the moment when, as Jesus promised them, they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Wondering just what he meant by that.

Suddenly a huge wind gushes through the house. Blowing in tongues of fire. Just as suddenly those Galileans find themselves speaking in other languages, “as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Hearing the ruckus, a crowd gathers—Jews and Gentiles from all over the Roman Empire—each of them hearing the Galileans speaking in their own language. They marvel at the miracle saying, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

Each time I hear this story, I marvel at the miracle at it’s core—the miracle of people learning to speak in languages others can hear and understand and take to heart.

Each time I hear this story, I’m reminded of how important language is, how much the language we use with one another matters.

I’ve been thinking a lot about how language functions this week. The cyclone in Myanmar drew it to my attention. I heard Laura Bush talking about the Generals in Myanmar, scolding them for neglecting the basic human needs of their people. Later in the week, I heard representatives from aid organizations saying how unhelpful such scolding was. And I heard the defensiveness of the Junta as well. Language being used not to open doors but to close doors.

I found myself wondering about language and it’s power to heal or to hurt. I found myself remembering a little ditty my mother taught me the day I came home in tears because the boy up the block had called me a name. She was trying to give me a shield against such hurt. You all probably know the words she taught me—“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” I remember wondering about that. I remember how much the words did hurt. I remember thinking, “Sticks and stones can’t hurt me nearly as much as those words did.”

Language makes a difference. The language we use with one another matters.

Just as I was thinking about language—the languages that came from the Galileans’ tongues and the languages we use in daily discourse, I opened up the morning paper. On the front page, above the fold, I saw this headline: “Dems escalate image war as finale nears.” I found myself wondering just how many instances of the language of fighting and war being applied to other events I could find in the morning paper. Among the words and images I found—public relations war, delegates on the march, in the fight, jabbing away, battle, casualty. I didn’t even check the sports section. I think you get the picture.

There are those who say that the language we use shapes the realities we encounter, the worlds in which we dwell.

I think they're right. The way we use language—the words we choose and how we speak them—makes a difference. They can unite or divide, create or destroy, expand or narrow horizons.

The Galileans huddled in that upper room were touched by the Holy Spirit and found themselves speaking in different languages. And all those in the crowd that gathered to hear them heard them in their own language.

There's a fair amount of scholarly debate about just what was the language miracle that happened at Pentecost. Some say it was a case of glossinolia—speaking in tongues; however, most scholars think that the disciples were given the ability to speak in languages the folks in the crowd spoke.

But I wonder—I wonder if something else was at work as well that day. I wonder if the followers of Jesus found themselves speaking not in one language but in many. Sure, they found themselves speaking the language of Parthians, Egyptians, Medes, Romans, Greeks and Africans. But I think they found themselves speaking another language as well—a language that creates, a language that unites, a language that expands possibilities for all.

I think they found themselves speaking a language that is patient; a language that is kind; a language that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. A language that is neither irritable nor resentful. A mothering language—a language that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I think they found themselves speaking the language of love.

Remember what the people gathered outside asked: “And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language....in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power?”

I don't doubt that they heard in their own separate languages, but they also heard in the native language they all shared. They heard in the language of love—the language that unites each and all as beloved children of God.

There is so much in our world that divides. There are so many ways we make one another into strangers. There are so many ways we convert one another into objects to be overcome, opponents to be beaten, enemies to conquer. There is so much violence in our language and in our lives—ranging from the benign to the malevolent, from a killer dress to an opponent to be crushed. Yet the spirit of Pentecost calls us to a different way of speaking and hence seeing the world. The spirit of Pentecost calls us to renew the face of the world by speaking the language of love.

Join me today in adopting a practice of Pentecost. Join me in practicing Pentecost in the language we use with one another, with our children, our partners and spouses, our colleagues and the stranger poking along in the car in front of us on Highway 101. Let us together become fluent in the language of love. **Amen.**