

Tracy Daub  
5/23/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Acts 2:1-21

## A NEW LANGUAGE

Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost—the three most significant days in the Christian calendar. Christmas and Easter—we have a pretty good understanding of what those holidays are about. But Pentecost? Our grasp of Pentecost is kind of fuzzy. What is Pentecost really about?

I can give you the standard answer to that question: Pentecost is the celebration of God's gift of the Holy Spirit. But this answer may not necessarily clarify things for a lot of us. The gift of the Holy Spirit? It's kind of like those times when you receive a gift and after opening it you're not sure what it is or what you are supposed to do with it.

The Holy Spirit is another way of talking about the vibrant presence of God. Before he was arrested and crucified, Jesus promised his followers that he would not abandon them in this world. Instead, he promised to send them the Holy Spirit--an Advocate, a Comforter, a Guide, for their walk of faith. Pentecost is when Jesus makes good on that promise. On that first Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in a very dramatic way and gifted the followers of Jesus with something profound. And we believe that this same Holy Spirit still comes upon us and gifts us with something profound.

So what is this gift?

Some Christians claim that the gift given on Pentecost is the formation of the Christian Church. Pentecost is even referred to by some as the “birthday” of the Church because after the Spirit inspires Peter to preach, many of those listening believed in the good news of Jesus and became followers. And the Church began to grow in numbers.

But here's the thing. Nowhere in the gospel accounts does Jesus attempt to start an institution or an organization. Jesus' goal was never to construct buildings or institutions but rather to show us the way to the kingdom of God here on earth. Certainly a following of committed Christians began to grow after the day of Pentecost, but I am not convinced that the creation of the Church was the primary gift given to those first follower long ago or even to us today.

Some might say that the gift on that Pentecost was the gift of energy and vitality. We know that those first followers of Jesus were scared and confused after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The same people who had killed Jesus might try to kill them. On top of that, what were they supposed to do now that Jesus was no longer with them? But then the Holy Spirit comes upon them and this scared and confused group of followers came out of hiding and boldly began to tell the story of Jesus. It would seem that the gift of the Holy Spirit could be this sudden burst of dynamic energy.

But here again, we run into some issues. First of all, the Holy Spirit does not only gift us with vigor and intensity. In the Gospel of John, we have another version of the Pentecost story when the risen Jesus appears to the disciples and breathes on them and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Unlike our story today, there was no violent wind, or flames of fire, or the cacophony of languages. John's gospel reveals a softer side of Pentecost. Sometimes the gift of the Holy Spirit works in gentle, quiet, softer ways.

To claim that the gift we receive from the Holy Spirit is ecstatic energy turns the Pentecost event into nothing more than a high school pep rally. High energy enthusiasm can be wonderful but it is hard to sustain and to what end? Truthfully, a lot of times faithfulness to the gospel of Christ does not arise from moments of ecstasy or excitement but from rather dull,

ordinary, or even unpleasant tasks—like cleaning up from communion, or serving on a committee for racial justice, or striving to forgive a difficult relative. Hate groups can generate a lot of enthusiasm from their followers too, but I would not claim that their enthusiasm is a gift from the Holy Spirit. So while the disciples were certainly filled with energy and vitality in the Pentecost story, I do not believe that these attributes were the end goals themselves.

Perhaps we can arrive at a better understanding of the gift we receive from the Holy Spirit by looking closely at the Pentecost story once again. When the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples, the first manifestation of its presence is that the disciples began to speak in other languages. Even though the disciples were Galileans, they began to speak in languages they had never learned. And in the midst of this cacophony of languages, the crowds of people gathered could hear what the disciples were saying in their own languages.

And then, Peter stands up and he begins to preach about Jesus. And in the course of his preaching he declares that what was taking place was the fulfillment of what the prophet Joel had said when Joel spoke about God's Spirit coming upon all flesh, and how "your sons and daughters shall prophesy," and declare God's words. Do you notice a common theme in all this? There is this recurring theme of language and speech. The gift those first disciples received from the Holy Spirit, the gift we today still receive from the Holy Spirit is the gift of a new language—the language of Jesus. I'm not talking about Hebrew or Aramaic--the languages Jesus might actually have spoken. I'm talking about the language of love and truth, the language he taught and demonstrated throughout his life. The gift we are given from the Holy Spirit is the gift of having something to say in this new language.

Jesus himself emphasized that the Spirit gifts us with something to say. In the passage we read today from John's Gospel, Jesus is talking to his disciples before his arrest. And he

promises to send them what he calls “the Advocate,” his term for the Spirit. And Jesus tells them that “the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, will testify on my behalf.” And then Jesus adds, “You also are to testify.” The Spirit enables us to testify, to say something, to speak the language of Jesus to this world.

There are lots of languages we are taught in the course of our lives. But among them all, the language of Jesus is distinct and unique. Here is what the language of Jesus is *not*:

It is *not* the language of self-interest or the language of doing what is conventional.

It is *not* the language of revenge or retaliation.

It is *not* the language of might makes right.

It is *not* the language of tribalism or nationalism that draws narrow boundary lines.

It is *not* the language of commerce or politics where the other person is only important so long as they are useful or profitable.

On that first Pentecost, the disciples were gifted with the ability to speak a new language—one more important than the earthly languages coming out of their mouths. They spoke about God’s love and truth as they were made known to them in the person of Jesus. In the language of Jesus, outcasts are included, justice is proclaimed and lived, and sins are forgiven. In the language of Jesus, enemies are loved, bread is shared, those in prison are visited, and the meaning of life is found in serving others. In the language of Jesus, the true treasure in life is found not in the possessions you can accumulate but in discovering ways to give yourself away for others. The language of Jesus proclaims the goodness of God and the triumph of God over every form of darkness.

This is the gift we receive from the Holy Spirit—the gift of having something to say in the language of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit gifts you with this language. You have been given

something important to say. Not a day goes by when the people around you do not need to hear the language of Jesus spoken by you through your words or actions. That is what it means to prophesy and to testify. We don't often realize it but a great many of the people around us each day are part of the "walking wounded." To us they may seem ordinary, maybe even successful. Or maybe they come across as irritating and hard to like. But all the while they bear wounds from their life story—wounds of abuse, wounds of loss or disappointment, wounds of not having been loved, wounds of shame or guilt, wounds from broken relationships or sorrow. There is great pain all around us. And people desperately need to hear a new language—the language of love and truth.

But let us also be clear: the language of Jesus is not always a safe language or an easy language. The disciples discovered that Jesus' language was not safe or easy when they were confronted with whether to include Gentiles into the community of faith. And this matter divided the community. They discovered the language of Jesus was not a safe or easy language when they were kicked out of their families and synagogues and when some of them were arrested and put in prison.

Other Christians down through the ages have discovered that the language of Jesus is not always safe or easy. Those who marched and protested during the Civil Rights era, who were beaten with clubs, attacked by dogs, thrown in prison, and threatened with their lives discovered that the language of Jesus is not always safe or easy.

But we live in a world that desperately needs to hear this language. In the midst of a world divided by race and inequality, a world where greed and materialism are celebrated, a world where lies are rewarded, the world needs to hear the language of love and truth. And you and I, we people of the church, have been gifted with something important to say through our

words and through our actions. It is the language of Jesus. We the Church have something important to say about black lives and gay lives and women's lives and incarcerated lives and immigrant lives.

Does this seem too political? That's what Jesus was accused of being—too political. And he was killed by the Romans as a political prisoner.

Love is always political. And as we have seen in our nation today, to speak the truth is political. Speaking the language of Jesus in this world is always political.

But the Spirit, the Spirit moves us on to speak that which is not safe or easy because this is God's language: the language that heals, the language that transforms, and the language that leads to life.

In an era when the Christian Church is experiencing a crisis of existence, we would do well to remember this important truth. Playing it safe will not revive the Church. The Church only comes alive when it speaks the language of Jesus.