

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Acts 2:1-21

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (Acts 2:5-6 N.R.S.V.)

A Gift of Languages

On the Day of Pentecost the gathered crowd was from many different countries. When the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples, the crowd was bewildered because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. The gift was both one of speaking and one of hearing.

There are about 7,099 different languages spoken in the world today. Trying to interact with someone from a different country can be a challenging and sometimes hilarious experience.

Rev. J. Barrie Shepherd is a Presbyterian pastor who came to this country from Scotland to study at Yale University. He tells about an experience he had shortly after he arrived. He needed to take a cab to the D.M.V. The cab driver heard his Scottish accent and inquired, “How long have you been in this country?”

“Two weeks,” Shepherd replied.

To which the cab driver exclaimed, “You sure did learn the language fast!”

I guess he didn’t know that they speak English in Scotland. Although to be fair, we might remember what Henry Higgins says in the musical, “My Fair Lady.” Higgins is expounding on the difficulties of the English language and he says, “Why in America, they haven’t spoken it in years!”

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples and they began to praise God. The crowd was bewildered because they could understand those who were speaking in their own native language. Peter takes this opportunity to explain to the crowd that the Prophet Joel had said in the old Testament that there would come a time when all believers would be prophets.

I remind you that this was a new thought. In much of the Old Testament, God spoke to a few select individuals and those individuals, often called prophets, spoke for God. In our lesson from Numbers the chief prophet for God was Moses. So this little tattletale comes to Moses and tells

him that Elad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. Joshua, first assistant to Moses, immediately tells his boss. You have to do something to stop them. But Moses says, “Are you jealous for me? Would that all God’s people were prophets.”

That is exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost. All of the Christians were prophesying. Men and women, slave and free, young and old - they were all prophesying.

Don’t get caught up in that word “Prophesying.” In common English today the word, prophesy, usually means to tell the future. But in the Bible the word prophet means, one who speaks for God. A prophet is one who speaks truth. And these truth-tellers are given the power to speak the truth by the Holy Spirit.

What that means is that all of us gathered here today are also prophets. We are given the power of the Holy Spirit to witness to the great acts of God. We are to tell the truth that sets people free of sin.

Now, I want to draw your attention to another important word in the Acts passage. The passage begins by saying that the disciples were all together in one place. The Greek word is a mouthful. It is pronounced, “hom-oth-oo-mad-on.” This particular Greek word is used only 12 times in the Bible, but it is used 10 times in the book of Acts. “Hom-oth-oo-mad-on” is a combination of two words. The first one means “to rush along.” The second one means “in unison.” So the word means to rush along together. Picture a football team rushing down the field, or a marching band smartly in step, or a flock of Geese arrowing through the sky.

The early Christian church was small, but they were mighty. They were mighty because they were rushing along together under the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am going to change gears here and speak about something that has been much on my heart lately. The Christian Church of today is divided. Our culture is divided. Our country is divided. So much so that we can’t even talk to each other any more. It is as if we are speaking different languages.

Lately we have been flooded with scenes of violence and mass killings right here in our own country. This is heartbreaking, terrible stuff. I am sure that an overwhelming majority of people in our country and in our churches want to end this horror. We really do. But instead of talking to each other and with each other, we are talking past each other. We are attempting to shout each other down instead of listening to each other.

It seems that everyone has an opinion about the cause of these terrible killings. Some say it is a mental health problem. Some say it is because we have too many guns and the wrong kinds of guns. Some say it is caused by the ever increasing blood and gore in movies and video games that cheapens human life. Some point to the number of single parent families. Some say it is a product of gangs and drugs.

It would be nice if we could somehow have an objective (big word there) study that would carefully examine all of the data and give us some firm answers. But congress has repeatedly refused to fund any such study. I suspect, though I don't know, that is because those industries that might be identified as part of the problem and thus take a hit on their profits - are working hard behind the scenes to shut any such study down before it even starts.

In the meantime, these industries are busy churning out statistics that favor their cause, information and disinformation, so that people can always find evidence to believe whatever they want to believe.

From a human perspective our situation looks grim. But we are not alone. We serve a mighty God. That brings me back to our lesson from Pentecost. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that unites us and makes us able to move rapidly together. It is also the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us speak truth in such a way that others can hear and understand it. And just as important, it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the gift of listening to the hard truths of God that others may be sharing with us.

Frankly this is all hard work. It is much easier to shout at each other and complain about others than it is to speak the truth in love and to listen just as carefully for the truth in what others are telling us.

I have been trying to put this into practice in my own life. After the recent shootings in Texas, I was talking with one of my nephews. He is a wonderful young man, polite, compassionate, and very likeable. Now I knew that he was a gun enthusiast, but I thought I can talk to him. Maybe gain some new insights from his perspective. I am not a big gun guy, but I grew up with hunting guns in the house. I did a bit of hunting as a teenager. And I inherited my Dad's .22 rifle, which I would not want to give up. And I can understand people in high crime neighborhoods, wanting a gun for protection. So I thought we could talk.

The conversation was frustrating to say the least. He did give me lots of statistics and examples that he believed showed that any gun control laws were useless and offensive. I pointed out where some of the statistics he was using were false or misapplied. He didn't seem to hear me. He then commented that we have a God given right to own guns. When I asked him what he meant, he said it was in the constitution, the bill of rights. I could have pointed out to him that the 10 commandments were given by God, but that the U.S. constitution is a very human document. But I just bit my tongue and waited to see what else he had to say.

We were both speaking English but we were not speaking the same language. I knew I was in real trouble when he told me that the Sandy Hook shooting was a false flag. He declared as an absolute fact that no children were ever killed there. It was all an elaborate hoax by the government to take away our guns. He had seen a documentary that proved this beyond a doubt.

I had no words. I still have no words. Though I imagine the parents of those killed might have plenty to say.

I am not saying this to put my nephew down. As I said, he is a good guy and he is a smart and

caring individual. I am merely pointing out the language barrier. We are talking but we are not communicating. We are having trouble with that “hom-oth-oo-mad-on.” We aren’t moving forward together under the Holy Spirit. We are still talking, but we need lots of Spirit help.

Friends, we cannot allow this terrible killing and blood shed to continue. For too long the conversation has been controlled by the talking points of the extremes. All of us have to be engaged with each other and with those who disagree with us.

I heard someone say the other day that we are not going to be able to eliminate evil in the world. Friends, may that never be an excuse for us to do nothing. Evil must be opposed.

My prayer is that God would send his Holy Spirit upon us and give us the courage to be both truth tellers and truth listeners. May God’s Spirit grant that we may be “hom-oth-oo-mad-on.” May we be moving forward together with united purpose.

Amen.