

## Inside Talk

### Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday, (June 8) 2025

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Forty years ago, I was working for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America in Atlanta, GA. (By the way, it was 40 years today – today! – that I was arrested in Washington D.C. for “incommoding” the entrance to the State Department at Foggy Bottom, for protesting the U.S. support for the Contras in Nicaragua.) Anyway, the Baptist Peace Fellowship was having a board meeting in south Georgia at the famous Koinonia Farm founded by Clarence and Florence Jordan. Clarence had died back in 1968, but Florence was doing well. We spent the first half of the day listening to her tell stories.

We began the second half of the day by going around the circle and introducing ourselves. Early on a short, barrel-chested, black-haired man who was an American Baptist pastor in Nebraska, introduced himself: Reeves Nawooks, who was originally from Oklahoma, said he was 100% Comanche. When he said that, my breathing caught, and my face flushed. When it came time for me, I said I was a Texan, a West Texan, and Reeves looked straight at me with his piercing eyes. As soon as we finished our session, Reeves made a beeline to me, and said directly, “So, you’re a West Texan? You know that is Comancheria?” I said, “Yes, I know. Your ancestors and my ancestors were enemies.”

Now, remember that we were brothers in Christ, both ordained Baptist pastors, and both dedicated to peacemaking working with the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, but at that moment we were both highly aware of

our ancestral animosity. For some reason, perhaps the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I remembered a couple of things from my extensive reading in Texas history when I was younger. I said, “mah-rah-way” which simply means “hello” in Comanche, and I made a sign of snake crawling through the grass. He was impressed and returned the sign and replied “mah-rah-way” back to me. He asked me how I knew the sign of peace in Comanche, a snake crawling through the grass, and how in the world did I know the Comanche word for “hello.” I told him I read a lot of books. I also confessed it was the only word in Comanche I knew. Reeves said, it was a lot more than most Taibos knew.

We went to supper together and ended up eating every meal together for the couple of days we were there. Reeves told me that he was fluent in the Comanche language, one of less than a hundred people in the entire world who could still speak it. When he was a boy, his parents and aunts and uncles taught him to speak Comanche at home in secret. At school a Comanche child would get in trouble for speaking their own language, the teachers would wash their mouths out with soap. Reeves said, “When a person is separated from their language, they cease to be a person.”

We live in a world of Death, Domination, and the Demonic that specializes in silencing us, in isolating and separating us from the Living God, separating us from Creation, separating us from each other, and separating us from the languages God gave us, languages which unify us and makes us whole, languages with which we speak our way into becoming who God intends us to be.

Our world is made up of barriers, obstacles, divisions, boundaries, brokenness, fragmentation, and differences. National boundaries, racial and ethnic differences, broken relationships, wars, feuds, disagreements, anger between

spouses, mistrust between parents and children, festering grievances between colleagues, disappointment between friends, impatience with those of another generation, or unkind words spoken between neighbors. And of course, there is constant babel where we are unable to speak or hear in ways that the other is truly understood.

But the Bible tells us that we are made for communion, relationship, connection, fellowship: communion with God, with each other, with others, and with all God's creation. It is for communion that we were originally created, and it is in full and deep communion that we will eventually end up with God and with one another. This is the Gospel. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that in him all that separates us and divides us is passing away and a New Creation has begun. In this New Creation we are reconciled and made one. In Christ we discover that we are members, we are in community, and we are to be witnesses, showing the wider world that peace and reconciliation is the Way.

Theologian Willie Jennings suggests a fresh, thought-provoking word to get at this healing work of Christ through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He calls it intimacy. Jennings defines intimacy as a relational and communal experience that transcends mere physical closeness. He emphasizes the importance of connection, openness to one another, and mutual understanding in forming deep relationships (see Jennings, *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p.28-31).

God speaks intimacy fluently.

The book of Acts is the story of how that begins to happen after the ascension of Jesus. Jesus' final instructions to his disciples before he ascended,

was to go back to Jerusalem and wait and pray. So back to Jerusalem the eleven disciples went. Matthias joined them as the new 12<sup>th</sup> disciple and for the next week they waited and prayed and were open. They listened.

It's Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, where there are Jews from all over the known world in the city for the festival celebrating the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. And suddenly, the windows blow open, papers and dirt and dust are blowing every which way. They are hit like a hurricane. And they hear a roaring sound. Like people describing a tornado, "It sounded like a roaring locomotive," so maybe they thought they were having a tornado.

And then there is fire shooting throughout the room. Some sort of fire or flame or crackling spark appeared above or around each of them. Old-timers who remembered the Dust Bowl in the U.S. in the 1930's say that during the dust storms that the static electricity was so great that if you touched someone else it would knock you down and it grounded out the electrical systems of cars so they stalled on the road and wouldn't start. They said you could see the sparks fly when people shook hands.

Blowing wind, crackling fire – and these disciples, every one of them from Galilee begin to speak in other languages. Nearby were Jews gathered from all over the known world and these Galileans begin speaking to them in languages these diverse peoples understand. It is a language of joining and unifying. In Acts 2:4 it says the disciples could speak in other languages. And in 2:6 it says that each person heard in their own language. And v. 8 says they were asking, "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" It emphasizes hearing also in vv. 11, 14, and 37. In other words, "we're able to understand what they're

saying.” And they listen. They listen to one another because it says in v. 13, they were listening to the disciples speak about God’s deeds of power.

This is how Acts begins and it never lets up. If you read onward in the book, you will see that soon the Holy Spirit is leading, pushing, pulling, dragging, these first apostles into sharing this story of redemption and reconciliation with all sorts of people: God-fearers like the Ethiopian eunuch. God-fearers were those who were not Jews but believed in Yahweh and wanted to worship with the Jews. But the Holy Spirit leads Philip to share with this Ethiopian God-fearer, and he is baptized and included in the membership of God’s New Creation. Not long after that, the Holy Spirit includes Samaritans and outright Gentiles, like the Roman officer Cornelius. And on and on, the Holy Spirit cajoles and pushes and drags the early church in going to people they never dreamed were to be included in God’s New Creation. The Book of Acts has all sorts of people, from all over the known world, who speak all kinds of languages joining together by the Holy Spirit. It is as if the Book of Acts is a rainbow book, full of diversity, equality, and inclusion, and this remarkable story continues to this day.

It all started on Pentecost, when the Spirit came and empowered them to speak and hear in each other’s languages. When the Spirit joined them to one another. This is why we call it the birthday of the church.

Most of have heard of couples falling in love, and one might say something like, “He gets me.” Or “She really understands who I am and what I’m about.” That’s the language of intimacy that Willie Jennings is talking about. Pentecost is not simply about hearing and speaking words in another language. It is an intimacy that discerns who each other is, and where we truly begin to get one another.

You and I know that this kind of understanding is no small thing. Those of you here who speak another language know that to be reasonably fluent, means also to think differently. To be fluent means submitting to another way of seeing and being with people. It is humbling because to be fluent means we give up our own habits and expectations and learn those of the other.

I'm sorry to say that I do not speak another language, but I have studied the ancient languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. And although I'm very rusty today, I clearly recall my experience of learning Hebrew. Of the languages I studied, Hebrew was the most different. It reads from the right to the left unlike English, Greek, and Latin, and it is a primitive language, one that puts a premium on context and interpretation. I was about halfway through the intensive class in Hebrew when I began to think differently. Knowing another language helps us see differently and think differently and I began to have dreams where Hebrew was being spoken.

At Pentecost, because of the Holy Spirit, when these people began to speak and hear in each other's languages, they also began to change their point of view. No longer seeing everyone else from their own point of view, they began to see from the other's point of view. They spoke from the other's perspective, and they had the vision and outlook of the other. They got one another, in a way only people who are intimate with one another know. Again, I am not talking about physical or sexual intimacy. I'm talking about making connection in community, in relationship. Much more like a good and healthy family, who know each other so well they might even have their own ways of speaking and understanding.

Jane and Judy have a family story from their childhood. On a customary Sunday night with church friends over for coffee, dessert, and fellowship several of

the little kids were playing in the bedroom, while the adults sat and talked, and the older children had their own conversations. Suddenly, from the bedroom, there was a noise and then loud crying. Quickly the door opened and out came little brother, Jeff, probably age 2 and not able to talk yet, screaming and crying. Right behind him rushed 4-year-old Brad, quickly shouting, “I didn’t kick Jeff in the head!”

Over the years, the story was told and retold so many times, that it became within the family, a shorthand way of talking about people telling on themselves. Instead of saying, “They told on themselves,” the family simply would say, “I didn’t kick Jeff in the head.” Everyone in the family laughed and knew immediately what it meant, while outsiders looked at each other wondering what in the world that meant.

It was “inside the family talk.”

The experience at Pentecost was something like the inside talk of people who know each other, and who know each other’s people, and know each other’s home country. Where we know the inside jokes, the inside stories - and here is something even more mind-boggling. At Pentecost this inside talk was not simply about knowing each other’s history and past, the old stories, and ancestors and family. The coming of the Holy Spirit is about creating a new people with inside talk about the future. This new people – what is called “church” is where we start living now what God is bringing about in the future.

Part of the work of the Holy Spirit, is to empower us to go outside of ourselves and meet, listen, and understand others, and learn to receive others as gifts of God, so we might all share life in communion and peace and joy.

Christian discipleship is like learning a new language. We start learning new words and terms: we learn what baptism means, and start talking about redemption, wholeness, grace, and mercy. We start learning the books of the Bible and we listen to these old stories and parables from Jesus. We mimic what we see and hear and eventually we learn the more formal aspects like grammar, syntax, and punctuation; like forgiveness, servanthood, and loving the unloved. All of us are always learning, working on our verbs, learning to pray, making sure we speak with clarity, finding ways to serve. In so doing we're being changed and becoming Christ's body.

We learn old forms of speech that church has been speaking for centuries and as we participate in the church's language, we learn we are part of an extraordinary diversity of people stretching across history, who are also calling us into the future.

Dwayne Key was one of our most faithful church members, a deacon and who had been chair of the committee which called me here. Nearly 30 years ago, Dwayne had a very serious heart-attack. Middle-aged, in good physical shape, with good health habits, no one saw it coming. He was rushed down to Houston to St. Luke's Medical Center. Over the next week, carloads of church members went down to keep Angela company while he was in CCU. I made numerous trips. Ruth, I recall you were almost living down there that week.

Finally, it was becoming clear that he was not going to make it. Dr. Bob Carroll, also a deacon, who was Dwayne's physician here in Nacogdoches helped translate the options to Angela. On a Sunday morning, I got a call that I needed to come down to Houston immediately, so I stood up at the beginning of the service and announced that three of us were going on down immediately. The other



deacons would lead the worship service and pray. After the service folks loaded up in cars and headed down to Houston themselves.

Most everyone got there before his vital signs made their precipitous decline. By this time, the CCU nurses had moved him down on one end of the ward and made room for anyone and everyone to come in. About 25 of us gathered around the bed and read Scripture, prayed, and then sang, “Amazing Grace” while Dwayne died.

Everyone was crying and hugging. Eventually, slowly church members began to slip out. As I made my way out, the supervising nurse called me over. She had tears in her eyes, “I’ve never seen anything like this before,” she said.

I thanked her and mumbled something about how good a friend he was.

I turned to walk away, and she stopped me, took my hand, and said, “The Lord be with you.” And, out of many church years of fluency, I responded, “And also with you.”

When we spoke our ancient language, I knew that we were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, the body of Christ, the communion of the saints. We were not alone; we were not cut-off. We were not separated and isolated from God and from each other. We were joined.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.