



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Speaking and Hearing

June 9, 2019

SCRIPTURE: The Pentecost Story Acts 2:1-21

(Babies talking) Everybody knows exactly what those voices are saying, right? Here's what I hear: God is good! (Congregation: All the time!) All the time! (God is good!) That's the story of Pentecost. If there was a themed hymn of Pentecost it might be this one: God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power. It might not even appear in the Pentecost section of the hymnal, but in my mind, that is exactly what Pentecost is about. And if you listen to this story, that is what Pentecost has always been about. Not just because we see this vision of flames appearing, not just because we feel the wind and hear that rumbling noise, but that this story, the story of Pentecost as read this morning, is a story of stories of stories of stories.

The Christian church, we didn't invent the celebration of Pentecost. Did you hear? They had gathered *for* Pentecost. You see, Pentecost already existed, and not only did it exist, it was pegged to 50 days after Passover. Remember Passover? That story of the people being freed from the bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt. God's power unleashing them from Pharaoh's power. But what is this story of Pentecost? What is this holiday of Pentecost? So, it's a Jewish word. I listened to 9 different recordings on YouTube of how to say it correctly. All 9 of them were completely different, so I'm not going to try. Instead I'm going to tell you about this holiday. It's a holiday that's a harvest festival. But more than that, it's a joyful festival. And more than that, it celebrates that in the giving of freedom, in this wandering through the wilderness, it marks the moment when the people entered into faithful covenant with God. This marking of Pentecost is the giving of the Torah and the Ten Commandments, not as a way of enslaving, but as a way of creating a life that is mutual and shared and given. You see, the story of Pentecost is already a story of how to live in community, where you love your neighbor as yourself, and love God with your whole heart, where everything that you do, every breath that you take, is obsessed with those two things.

But those aren't the only stories that are embedded in this story. There is that violent wind, which, again, evokes the ideas of creation and the Spirit of God creating things

at the beginning of all time. It is *ruach*, the holy breath that breathes in front of us. There is the flame, which is the very image of that flame that danced before the people as they wandered at night in the wilderness. No, there is story upon story upon story.

And then there is the language thing. That too is a story of a story. If you remember early in the Bible there is that story of the Tower of Babel, right? It is a story of power, make no mistake about it, because human beings, rather than following God's calling to go out into the world to be fruitful and multiply, they decided instead they were going to build power for themselves. They were going to erect this skyscraper that went to the heavens, that the people, instead of living out God's great command in community, instead could become God-like themselves, seize as much power as they could. And while the Bible says that God split up their languages -- and who am I to argue with that -- I wonder in thinking about my own life that when you are obsessed with power, when you are searching after power for its own sake, I wonder when people simply stopped listening to each other. When their own paths took them on a way where they started speaking about what they wanted, and the person listening was too preoccupied with hearing what they wanted, and *that* person was too preoccupied hearing what they wanted, that they simply spoke and no one heard. They spoke right past each other. Because in the end, all they're interested in is what's in it for me. This is a story within a story within a story within a story.

Here's the interesting thing, though, about this story. There are two groups in Jerusalem on that day. The first, they're called the faithful. In some translations, the devout. That's you, by the way. Those are the people who decided to care about this way of life Jesus was talking about. Those who decided to follow Jesus and show up. And by the way, the number of faithful in that day, they would have numbered about the same as the number of people in this room. So that was one group, the faithful.

And then there were all these other people from far flung lands that Cindy read so beautifully. All those places you've never heard of. They weren't in Jerusalem necessarily for any reason other than, one translation says, they were immigrants. They were there because they were fleeing the hardships they were encountering in the Roman Empire. They were there because they were seeking out a place that would welcome them in, because remember, our faith tells us that we are to welcome in the foreigner, even if we've forgotten. So these people were there in Jerusalem, and they would have known two languages. You see, they would have known the language of their home country, the place that they were living, they would have known it well. They would have known a second language, too, not Latin, but Greek. Because you see, Greek was the language that the Roman army used to communicate with the people in the various areas. You were expected to know it at your own peril. Because if you didn't, and a soldier told you to do something, and you didn't understand what was being asked of you, not the soldier's problem. Greek was a coercive language. It was a language designed to bring people together under the power of Rome. It was coercive because it was meant for you to give up what you spoke in order that you

could speak that language.

So that second group of people, these immigrants who spoke different languages, here's what happened. The faithful, they were telling the story. They were not seeking power for themselves, rather they were trying to share the power of God, the power of love, the power of grace. They were speaking, and all these people understood them in their own languages. This is not a Pentecostal moment as we think of it in modern times, where somebody stands up and says something in a language that's never been created, and yet everyone understands. The faithful, they are speaking in their language, and yet these people from these far off lands, they hear it in their own. The story of Pentecost, you see, is the fact that when we speak the truth of the story, when we seek to give away the power of God rather than hoard it to ourselves, when we speak of things like love and new life and grace and forgiveness and fresh starts, people can understand that, no matter what language they hear, and hear it. They understand it. What's being spoken on Pentecost is the truth of what it means to follow God.

I wonder in our time right now, I'm sure other times have felt this way, but I wonder if there's ever been another time where there is more speaking and less hearing, where there are more people talking for the sake of power, and talking right past each other. Whether you are on the left or on the right, there is an awful lot of speech-making, of pontificating that is going on in this world right now. What this story suggests is that rather than speaking for our own power base, our own party base, our own particular interests or needs, that we should instead be speaking to and from, letting the blessings of God flow through us to the world, and when we do so, everyone will understand.

This may not be the most churchy example to give you, but it's a real one that has just happened. And some of the people in this room have experienced its power. By the way, did we remember to lift up prayers when those people in Virginia Beach died from gun violence? Or was it just another one and so we let it go because we can't pray for so many of them? The group I'm talking about is the group that got together to talk about this awful problem of gun violence. For you see, this group got together, not in some great holy place, but rather a community center, a place who opens their doors so that the community might come in. And this group of people gathered together to talk about a problem that none of us had any illusion that we could actually solve or fix, but instead to share stories. I will tell you this: we invited many to come to this dialogue. We invited many people who scoffed, just like Jeremy, who said these people are drunk. They're kidding themselves. They're delusional. You can't talk about guns and our culture without falling into yelling. And many of them chose not to show up. But here's what I know about those who did. When we got in that room and we agreed to some common sense rules, when we got in that room and agreed to share stories, not speeches, when we agreed to talk about our own lives, not to argue about somebody else's. When we only agreed to say something from our perspective, here's what happened. People who would never have talked to each other before weren't just

talking, they were hearing. They were listening.

In one group, there was a member of our congregation, and there was a young boy from Simon's Rock. The member of our congregation is a hunter, somebody who has used guns in his lifetime. That young boy, given his own family history and given his education at Simon's Rock, wanted nothing to do with guns. Yet by the end of these dialogues, they were hiking together. The young man was trying to figure out how he could learn how to operate a firearm safely, and he was wondering how he might bring this dialogue, this conversation, back to his far more conservative community in New Hampshire.

There was another table where again, it came down to those who have experience with guns and those who don't. And there was a woman who made it clear she wanted nothing to do with guns, that she felt that in her world, if she had her way, there wouldn't be guns in the world. And yet she asked the question in that group, how do I get one? I don't know if she was asking because she actually wanted to purchase one, but she wanted to understand the process from someone who had been through it about how this works.

Here's what I know, that in those moments and through those weeks, people spoke and they heard. That's what this story of Pentecost is all about. How do we speak, not to gain power, not to solidify power, not to prove that we're right, not to proselytize our faith, but simply to go out from this place speaking about God's love and God's truth. If we do, here's what I imagine. Even if someone has never stepped foot through the door of a church, even if someone has promised to give up on religion altogether, they will at least hear you. And I promise it will begin a conversation. And that holy *ruach*, that wind that has blown since the beginning of time, that Spirit of gentleness, it will keep on spreading.

Friends, O that people might imagine when you leave this place that you are drunk. O that people might imagine that you are so filled with this Spirit, that you are speaking in nonsense. Because this world no longer recognizes love and truth and peace. On this day, don't just be amazed at the things spinning through the air. Don't just be joyful about you waving a spinner. Go out there and be that breath of love. Go out there and speak. And when you do, speak nothing but peace and love and truth. And I promise, you'll be heard.

The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor

