

Sermon for May 15, 2016

Pentecost

"Something Happened!"

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-11

Something happened! Something happened that first Pentecost Sunday and I am not entirely sure what it was. I wasn't there after all and all I have to go on is the account recorded in Acts. Based on that account I had always assumed that the Holy Spirit gave the apostles the ability to speak in other languages. For instance, maybe Matthew spoke in Greek while Thomas spoke in Latin etc. After all it says that they spoke in "other languages." But one Sunday I preached a sermon on Pentecost that included a description of just such an event. After the sermon a church member, who knew her Bible very well, came up to me and said, "What a unique interpretation." I was surprised but as we talked I discovered that she had always been taught that the disciples were speaking the language of the Holy Spirit and the people "heard in their own language". In other words, Matthew and Thomas and the others were speaking in the language of the Holy Spirit and God gave the people the ability to understand in their own language. So for her the miracle of Pentecost was not so much a miracle of tongues as a miracle of ears; not a miracle of speaking, but one of hearing.

So which was it? Was it a miracle of tongues or ears? I don't know! I wasn't there! This much I do know: something happened. Something wonderful happened! The Holy Spirit was poured out and something wonderful and miraculous took place.

Now, if I were God and I wanted to do something miraculous what would I do? Perhaps I would part an ocean and lead people to freedom in the Exodus. Perhaps I would orchestrate a showdown with God's enemies and would rain down fire from heaven as God did for Elijah. Perhaps I would turn the twelve apostles into superheroes that would make the Justice League look like wimps. Now I am getting silly, but of all the things God could have done at that moment God chose to work a miracle of communication. Instead of fires or earthquakes or superhuman powers, God granted the ability to communicate.

I think to understand what is happening here we need to go back thousands of years. Back to an unknown plain in ancient history. Back to a time when there were no "other" languages. The Bible describes a time when the people of the earth all spoke one language. And in pride they decided to build a tower to God. "Let us build a siege tower to heaven and storm the citadels of the Almighty," they said.

Ridiculous as this was, they went about the attempt and started to build a tower of pitch and mud bricks. Of course their attempt was so puny that God is described as having to descend to even get a look at it. The project would never succeed, but as long as the people were working on it, they would never truly turn to God. Instead of trusting God to descend to them, they would be trying to ascend to God.

So God confused their language. Suddenly there were other languages. One worker asked to a brick and everyone looked at him funny until he lost his patience. Another asked for some pitch and was tossed a brick which hit him on the side of the head. The formerly cooperative effort collapsed into a confusing babble of languages. And the peoples of the world scatted, as God had intended.

Most Bible scholars view this story as a jab at the middle Eastern practice of building Ziggurats which were tall buildings similar to pyramids with a temple at the top. I think there is more going on in this story than just an attempt to ridicule the religious practices of others or to understand why people speak different languages. Part of the wisdom of this story is its realization that understanding, or the lack thereof, often divides us. Something as basic to who we are as the language we use, often is the very thing that makes it difficult to relate to one another.

If you think about it, God didn't need to go to all that trouble. People seem to babble on enough without God's help. Even when we are supposed to be speaking the same language, we often seem to be speaking different languages. Parents often speak English to their English speaking children, and yet

the children don't seem to understand. The English speaking children try to communicate with their English speaking parents, and they might as well be speaking Russian! The church uses the common language to tell people that God loves them and wants to save them, yet they don't understand. One group of Christians say "God is love" and the other group agrees, yet "God is love" translates into a completely different set of actions.

This is the miracle of Pentecost. Not so much a miracle of tongues or a miracle of ears, but a miracle of communication. God undid the damage caused by human sinfulness represented in the story of the tower of Babel. In the story of the tower of Babel people wanted to be gods unto themselves. And the consequence was that their speaking and understanding were confused. They were no longer speaking the words of God, but the words of humans and they made no sense. But at Pentecost the faithful were given the words of God, the language of the Spirit, if you prefer. Others were given the ability to understand the words that were spoken. And that day thousands heard good news of new life.

But not all heard and understood. There were some who thought it was all drunken babbling. I suppose their hearts were so hard they refused the gift God offered them.

Of all the things God could have done at Pentecost, God chose to give these early Christians the ability to communicate with the world. That is significant! God could have performed signs and wonders. God could have orchestrated mass healings and resurrections. God could have destroyed the earthly citadels of evil. But God chose to make communication happen.

Do you remember what Jesus' last words to his disciples were before he ascended to send the Spirit? "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8b) A witness is one who testifies to what they have seen. If the jury can't understand the witness, they are not much good. And if the witness doesn't know what they are talking about, they are unreliable.

God gave the gift of communication at Pentecost because that is our first job as disciples. Our first job is to bear witness to what we have seen and heard. It is our first job as the church to tell the world of God's love. And it is not by our own ability, but by the gift of God that we can do this. It is God who takes our babbling and turns it into a testimony of the Gospel that can be heard and understood.

Something happened at Pentecost: God gave the disciples the ability to overcome the curse of Babel and to communicate clearly so people could hear and be saved. But I still hear a lot of babbling going on in the church. When people are asked what they believe, I hear them saying "Well, I ... uh ... believe - you know - kind of ...uhh...." When someone asks you what you believe, do you babble? If I asked you to stand up here this morning and tell us about Jesus, would you communicate or mumble? Or would you say you believe that God loves the world and that we should put our trust in God and follow the example of Jesus' life and teachings. When you are confronted with a public debate, do you stammer and babble, or do you proclaim the love and judgment of God.

Perhaps we need to pray for God to heal our tongues! God gave the Apostles the ability to communicate and God will give us the gift of communication if we will seek it. If we will surrender ourselves to the Spirit of God we will be given the words we need to speak. Didn't Jesus say that when we are dragged before councils that the words we need to speak would be given to us. (Matthew 10:19) Know what you believe, and then when the time comes just trust the Holy Spirit to guide you as you proclaim the Word of God. That is a gift of tongues as great and honoring to God as any.

But let's not forget the hearers. Communication is a two-way street. We need to pray for those to whom we are bearing witness so that they can understand. Not only do we need tongues from God to speak the truth, but people need ears from God to understand what we are saying. Then the miraculous communication that overcomes the curse of Babel can happen just as it did at Pentecost.

Something happened at Pentecost. Something happens at Pentecost. Something is happening! Can't you hear it? The sound of a mighty rushing wind. Jesus, the Son of God died and rose again and sits at the right hand of God. Do you hear what I am saying?! Jesus died to offer forgiveness and liberation to anyone who will believe in him. Go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to your belief!