

“Voices and Visions”

Acts of the Apostles 2.1–21

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 27 May 2007

Pentecost is, for us in the 21st century, kind of an odd church holiday. When I say the word Pentecost to you, what name or word or image comes to your mind? If it was “Pentecostal” you are like most Americans. Pentecostalism is an explosive religious phenomenon that began in Los Angeles, of all places, just over a hundred years ago, and now it is threatening to displace Roman Catholicism as the dominant form of religion in Latin America. Pentecostalism centers around “gifts of the Spirit” that typically includes speaking in tongues. The largest Pentecostal denomination in the United States is the Assemblies of God, and the largest Assemblies of God church in Fort Collins is Timberline.

So the word Pentecost can stir some associations that may not be what you would consider part of your faith tradition...but I’m not quite ready to hand over the Pentecost to the fundamentalists quite yet.

Speaking in tongues – glossolalia is the technical term – is unintelligible speech, as Paul describes in the first letter to the church in Corinth. And if you’re like me, your experience may not include Pentecostalism or speaking in tongues, so what does this passage have to do with us?

The author of this book, a continuation of the gospel according to Luke, is not describing unintelligible speech: just the opposite! It isn’t a **lack** of understanding that the Spirit imparts, but rather a **depth** of understanding so profound as to enable the good news to be conveyed in ways that others “get it,” too.

When you heard members of the congregation stand up and read the scripture in different African and European languages, you may not have understood what they were saying. But think how thrilling it would be if you were a tourist from another country to hear your mother tongue spoken by strangers in a foreign land. You’d feel as though you were no longer an outsider – rather, you’d feel included and at home.

The gift of speaking to a person in their own language is a most profound way of saying, “You are welcome here,” which undergirds the ideas of Luther and of the Second Vatican Council in ensuring the use of vernacular language for scripture and for worship. For most of us, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew just don’t cut it anymore.



The story of Pentecost is the story of language, of understanding, and of being understood.

Let me read you a passage from the eleventh chapter of Genesis, that you may know. It’s a story about how people in different parts of the world developed different language.

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not

understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

One way to look at this story is as a primordial myth that explains how different languages came about: the residents of Babel (which we now call Baghdad) were using technology to such a high degree that they were encroaching on God's turf, so God decides to knock them down a few rungs by giving them each a different language, so that they could not understand.

The Pentecost story reverses the myth of the Tower of Babel: now people who had been scattered are drawn together by the Holy Spirit and they are united by common understanding of language, rather than being divided by their incomprehension.

Language either divides or it connects; it either excludes or it includes. The Tower of Babel story is about dividing people from one another through language; The story of Pentecost is about the experience of connecting people with each other through language.

One of our deepest human needs is for connection with one another. We see it in newborns who bond with parents. It is part of who we are as the human family. And the need for connection moves outward in concentric circles as we mature. We make friends in preschool; we join team or clubs in school; we involve ourselves in the life of the community through service and affiliation. And that need for connection is part of why we are here at Plymouth.

And we need connection on an intimate level as well. We have a deep need to be known and understood by another human being, and we also have a deep need to be known at the core of our being by God. I'm not talking here about superficial friendship, but rather deep, intimate knowing. (It's probably why we talk about "knowing in the biblical sense.") Seriously, our sexuality at its best is a gift that enables two people to connect and know each other deeply and intimately. And that is why casual sex disables intimacy. (So, for those of you who thought you'd never hear sexual ethics discussed from this pulpit...it just happened.)



Dreams and visions. Powerful stuff that we find in this morning's scripture. One of the questions I asked consistently of the congregation during our strategic planning process and Centennial year is "What is your dream for Plymouth?" And one of the things we heard during that process and as recently as our church council retreat is a quotation from Isaiah: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." *Dreams and visions.*

I have a question for you: is your dream for yourself and your community of faith to build barriers: Walls of communication and language? Walls of secrecy? Walls to keep out those who are unlike us? Walls to keep out aliens? *The Tower of Babel myth is creates walls that isolate people from each other.*

Or is our vision to build bridges? Bridge between people of various languages and cultures and races? Bridges between men and women? Bridges between the haves and have-nots? Bridges between straight, bisexual, and gay people? Bridges between Jews and Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, Bahais and Hindus? Our Open and Affirming statements speaks boldly about building bridges and welcoming people into the fellowship of this church. *The vision of the Pentecost story is the creation of bridges that tie people together, across barriers that otherwise might divide us.*

Our dream and our vision is of a better world, a world with fewer divisions and fewer walls. And we need to be the bridge-builders, because if we don't do it and bring others along with us, who will? Do you see a lot of bridge-building going on in the

Anglican Communion between African bishops and the North American bishops? (It looks a lot more like Babel than Pentecost.) Do you see the United Methodist Church building bridges to GLBT folks? Do you see the Pope building bridges to Islam? Do you see evangelicals building bridges with Jews (excepting of course the Christian Zionists who think that getting all the Jews to go to Israel will hasten the Rapture)? While we can be empathic with our brothers and sisters, perhaps we can help them find some common ground and build bridges. (And we have our own bridges still to be built as well.)

The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, which comes from two other Latin words: the noun, *pontus*, and the verb *facere*. *Pontus* is bridge, and *facere* is to build. So, a priest is literally a bridge builder. And since we adhere to Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers, you are all priests...all bridge-builders.

The Pentecost experience is about all people discovering a common language they can all understand. It is about tearing down the walls that divide us and building new bridges.



One of the things that I keep hearing from the many young adults who join Plymouth is that they are seeking **community**, and they find it here. In spite of our cell phones, pagers, text messaging, and email we are increasingly cut off from each other. We watch TV, get lost in our PlayStation2, surf the internet...all things that are essentially solitary. But there is probably no better example of technology that cuts us off from others as the iPod. I can be rocking out Great Big Sea, while **you** are jamming to the Yellow Jackets, while **you** are chilling out listening to Bach, and while Sharon is singing along with the Indigo Girls. And in some sense it's nice that we can choose to have some musical isolation sometimes. (I love my iPod!) But, aren't we building walls around ourselves and cutting ourselves off from each other and ultimately from community?

We need to listen to each other's music – not all at the same time, which would be like Babel – but we need to know what people in their 20s listen to, and what people in their 80s listen to. **[Play soundtrack]**

Listening to each other's music – the music of our hearts as well as the music in our ears – is an important way we build *koinonia*: the fellowship, the community of Christ.

We have something very special in this community. So, I have a challenge for you. After worship today, go and say hello to someone from a different generation. Engage them in conversation. Ask what kind of music they like and what about it makes it meaningful. Speak *their* language, if only for a little while.

With our dreams and our visions, without voices and music, – with the tools we have within this community – we can all be bridge builders. So, let's build a few!

Amen.