**A Language Camp Baptism**

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b  
Acts 2:1-21

I will confess to being a bit jealous of the disciples gathered together on what we now call the first Pentecost. Sure, it would have been great to be there for the founding event of the church when Peter, Mary, Martha, John, James and all the followers of Jesus go from quiet discouragement to a sudden burst of energy, confidence and determination. Who wouldn’t want to be part of such a pivotal time for the church? To be able to tell your children and grandchildren, “Yeah, I was there.” I would have loved to have heard Peter’s sermon that day. It must have been a knock your socks off message. We just get a little snip of it in our Gospel. Over the years I have attended a number of preaching conferences and have heard some nationally known excellent preachers. You invariably go away inspired about ministry, about preaching, up lifted and ready to re-engage. I would have liked to have been there that first Pentecost for Peter’s sermon.

But, what really makes me jealous is the language camp experience they have. Luke tells us, they are gathered together in one place and suddenly the spirit starts moving around, like a mighty wind, something like tongues of fire are resting on each of them. In short order they are speaking Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, and a few other languages in that region. I have seen all types of promises on quick easy ways to learn a language, but I have seen nothing like what happened on Pentecost. I wish I had been there.

My first stab at learning a language was in High School. I took a Spanish class. There were two problems with learning Spanish in High School. One was that we were a class made up 5 teenage boys. The other problem is that our teacher was right out of college and if you ever listen to Garison Keilier describe the mysterious woman that Guy Noir frequently encounters, you will get a little idea of our Spanish teacher. Here is one of Keilier’s descriptions, “*Her perfume was like it was spring and I was 17 all over again. Her hair was like wheat, her eyes like emeralds. Her skin was what God had in mind when he said let there be skin. Her jeans were so tight I could read the label on her underwear…. She gave me a smile so sweet I could've poured it on my pancakes.”* Our teacher never wore tight jeans, but she did often wear form fitting sweaters. No fault of the teacher, but we did not learn much Spanish.

Back in the 1980s, Michele and I spent a month in Cuernavaca, Mexico at a Language Camp. We were starting to get the hang of it, but then our time was up. We didn’t use it much when we returned and the Spanish slipped away. I have occasionally listened to tapes in hopes of improving, but it all seems to take more time than I have available. I am guessing some of the youth in our church have taken language classes, perhaps been at a language camp. Even if you have been more successful than me, you will have to admit that learning another language is hard work. There are no easy formulas. You have to put in the time. Learn the vocabulary. Practice.

I would have loved to have been at that first Pentecost language camp. A few swirls around the room by the Spirit and presto you are speaking another language.

Pentecost is, of course, about much more than finding the “Holy Grail” for easily learning another language. There is in fact, no indication that those who suddenly found themselves speaking French, Russian or Chinese could repeat a single word the next day. As far as we can tell from Scripture, it was a onetime deal.

We do, however, know several important things about Pentecost, the birth of the church and the working of the Spirit. First of all, language clearly matters as vehicle for communication and connecting with one another. There is in this Pentecost spirit infused gathering of early Christians no expectation that everyone else must learn Hebrew, Arabic, or English for that matter. The experience of Pentecost, the foundational moment for the church, is one of great openness and readiness to connect across all the boundaries we create as humans, embracing our language differences. There is absolutely none of the insistence that later infected the mission of the church, whereby we equate the radical message of God’s love with the highly individualized values so prominent in Western culture.

No one says, “here is what a good Christian looks like, here is what a good Christian sounds like”. You maybe have read “The Poisonwood Bible” by Barbara Kingsolver. In her book, the Minister has so utterly confused western values with Christian life that he continues insisting people be baptized in this African river, even though the locals know the river is full of crocodiles. Is there any wonder he had few takers for baptism? I am guessing that if I told Eli, Oliver and Francis that we had a pond full of crocodiles and that is where they will be baptized, they would be a bit hesitant. On the first Pentecost, in this spirit filled room, there is no insistence on uniformity or conformity to the values of the dominant group. On the contrary when the spirit is at work what we find is an incredible openness and desire to reach across the barriers and boundaries that keep us separate.

We also learn from the experience of the first Pentecost that the Spirit of God shapes us and calls us into a community that is radically inclusive. Not only does the spirit break down linguistic barriers, but the spirit also breaks down barriers of gender, age and one can conclude every other barrier we might create. Everyone has a role to play. No one is left out. Among the reasons I would have loved to have heard Peter preach is the quote we are given from his sermon in our lesson today. Peter is quoting the Hebrew prophet Joel, but reformulates the words so that they become a promise of God’s spirit at work “*I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy*.” The spirit of Pentecost calls and shapes us into a radical boundary shattering community of love and justice where everyone has a role.

These values of radical inclusion are often at odds with the dominant values of our culture and society, which tend toward hierarchy, privilege, status. Early Christians who hear Luke tell the story of Pentecost recognize the significance of the flame resting on all those in the room. The flame is a symbol used to claim divinity for the Emperor thereby offering a spiritual blessing to the values of empire, power and wealth. This Pentecost spirit filled, radically inclusive community, with the flame of God, resting on their heads, stands in tension and conflict with dominant cultural values that exclude.

There is one other key dimension to the Pentecost spirit that blows over these early Christians and it does have to do with their unique language camp experience. Although there is no mention of water in this story, one of the things we associate with baptism is the spirit of God. At its core, Pentecost is the story of God’s spirit baptizing all who follow the way of Jesus with a new spirit and a new language. Unlike our human language which can divide and separate, the language of the spirit is a language of the heart. The language of the spirit enables us to communicate love, compassion, justice even when the words themselves are hard to fine.

Perhaps you saw the front page story in last Sunday’s newspaper about the relationship of two boys graduating from Stillwater High. I often feel like these human interest stories, while interesting, belong somewhere else other than on the front page of the newspaper. Last week’s story is an exception. It belonged right where it was. It is the story about a young boy in 4th grade, 4th grade, making an incredible difference in the life of his classmate and as a result making a difference for many others as well.

It was 2006 when the Paron-Wildes family moved to Stillwater. They sent out a flyer to the class-mates of their son who was then in 4th grade. The flyer asked for a volunteer to have a play date with their son, Devin who has autism. The article says Devin “struggles to pay attention. He has trouble learning and interacting with others”. Nick Dinzero volunteered. Now as seniors in high school they are fast friends and graduating together. Over the years Nick helped Devin learn how to ride a bike, play football and wrestle. Nick insists he has learned a lot from Devin as well, especially patience.

Particularly poignant is the way in which Nick says he often communicates with Devin. “Nick says his name a lot to get his attention, he makes sure Devin is looking at him and he often pat’s Devin’s chest.” What language is Nick speaking to his friend Devin? “Saying his name, looking him in the eye, tapping him on the chest.” I doubt you will find any of this in any language study program. You will however, find the language Nick is speaking with Devin at the language camp of the first disciples when the spirit of God baptizes them with a language of the heart and God’s love reaching out across barriers that otherwise divide.

Should it come as a surprise that a 4th grade student becomes fast friends with another 4th grade student who has autism? Should it be a surprise that a young person has such a tremendous impact on the life of a fellow student, on the school and community he or she attends? It comes no surprise to Peter and those early disciples infused, empowered, baptized with the language of God’s spirit.

I would love to have been at that first Pentecost language camp. But, I am happy to be right where I am today with the possibility of God’s spirit still at work, among the young, among the old, among all whose hearts are open.

**Psalm 104:24-34, 35b**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist sings about the presence of God’s spirit in all creation. God’s spirit was there at the very beginning and it is God’s spirit that continues to make life possible.*

O God, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea,  great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan  that you formed to sport in it.  
These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of God endure forever; may God rejoice in God's works — God who looks on the earth  and it trembles,  
God who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to God as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to God, or in God do I rejoice. Bless God, O my soul. Praise be to God!

**Acts 2:1-21**   
*In an amazing and sudden turn of events, the disciples still reeling from the crucifixion of Jesus and their experience of resurrection are in today’s lesson filled with the transforming power and energy of God’s spirit. It is the day of Pentecost, the birthing day of the church as a community of faith guided by the spirit of the Risen Christ. Among the immediate outcomes of the Spirit’s presence is the capacity to speak a new language.*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.  
  
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. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs - in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."  
  
But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:  
  
'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
   and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
   and your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
   in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
     and they shall prophesy.  
And I will show portents in the heaven above  
   and signs on the earth below,  
     blood, and fire, and smoky mist.  
The sun shall be turned to darkness  
   and the moon to blood,  
     before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.  
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'