

These are the two sermons I wove together on May 15, Pentecost. Sermon 2 battling with Sermon 1. Occasionally, pages of Sermon 1 got discarded – intentionally. At one point, the wind came along and took the last page of Sermon 2 - unintentionally – but it felt like what was supposed to happen on Pentecost. I urge you to listen to the sermon rather than read it.

## Sermon 1

I am on the temporarily named Adult Faith Formation and Exploration Ministry. We've been talking a lot about programs for the 2016-17 church year. We've bounced around a lot of ideas – and often find ourselves imagining how this or that topic would be received by the congregation. We stop ourselves almost before we get started, feeling constrained, afraid. We don't want to present anything too controversial. Do we address institutional racism? We know there are differing views on this – perhaps it would be better to stay away from it. What about the refugee situation? That's awfully close to the question of immigration and citizenship. What about the growing income inequality? No – that could become an unpleasant argument about welfare and public assistance; about the role government should play in people's lives. And we don't want an 11<sup>th</sup> hour to turn nasty. We don't want a scenario where people say things they can't take back, where one viewpoint dismisses another as ridiculous or idiotic. We don't want an argument, do we? Or do we?

In this polarized world, argument has gotten a bad name. In our public discourse we have name calling and accusation and call it a debate. We have crowds of people screaming at each other and call that an argument. We have speeches where the words are chosen with the express purpose not to say anything. We have television programs where everyone talks at the same time, interrupting constantly. It drives me crazy – just let the guy finish. But then we discover that without interruption, a candidate will go on and on until the program is over. Politics is not the only venue for this free for all. Have you ever channel surfed past a program where two women are literally tearing each other's hair out over some man? Not everything that passes for argument today is violent – some of it is sly and depends on innuendo – implying something illegal or immoral without naming it. No wonder we try to avoid argument. But it isn't argument we're afraid of – it's incivility, bluster and insults. Of course we're afraid to talk about important questions if we think it will end in mayhem.

So we talk only to the people who speak our language, who agree with us. Or we don't talk at all – not about what really matters. We only listen to opposing views in order to ridicule them. That kind of listening is actually just a pause for us to select the words we will use to debunk whatever the other is saying. Maybe you are listening to me that way right now. I hesitated about this sermon. Maybe urging us to argue with one another is too radical.

But how are we to heal the divide in this country? How are we to heal the wounds which make us partisan enemies rather than fellow citizens? How are we going to solve some of the dire problems in the world that are only getting worse? If we, who are part of this loving community, can't be honest with one another, who can be? I know there are differing views here – that in these pews republicans sit next to democrats; libertarians pray for socialists. I also know that this room, this congregation, is filled with caring, intelligent, wise people. It's easy to think someone pontificating on television is a misguided idiot. It's a lot harder to be so judgmental when it is one of you.

Today is Pentecost, referred to as the birth of the Christian church. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit appears for the first time in a rush of air and the glow of fire. The spirit Jesus had promised had arrived. And the Holy Spirit's first action? Making it possible for people of differing cultures and languages to understand one another. The disciples spoke in Galilean and people who came from far flung countries, who spoke Egyptian, Greek, Latin – they heard as if the disciples were preaching in Egyptian, Greek, Latin, in their own language. People's differing backgrounds and cultures did not stand in the way of hearing about God's power, did not thwart communication. The first characteristic of the church was hearing AND listening. People heard and understood. People heard. People understood. That is what the church invites us to – to communicate with one another.

We have to talk to one another – surely no one viewpoint has all the answers; surely any person can have a piece of the truth. But we have to listen to one another. We have to **want** to listen to one another. The presence of the Holy Spirit is what allows us to understand when people are speaking in another language – not Spanish or Flemish, but the language of Liberal or Conservative, Libertarian or Socialists. We must have the intention, the openness of heart to hear what another is saying. I say this to you – knowing that if our television could talk it could report many snide and superior remarks I've made to someone on it. It is so delightful to be right, to be clever. We often have MSNBC on at home. Carol calls it the news – but we both know that isn't true. During the health care debate, program after program showed pictures of rallies where people were holding signs saying, "Keep the government out of my Medicare." MSNBC reveled in mocking them for the 'ignorant' way they were understanding the affordable care act. I'm not sure I yelled at my TV, but I remember thinking those signs were ironic and comical. Then one day, by some devilment of my TV, I was listening to Newt Gingrich. And he was lambasting the MSNBC pundits that ridiculed people holding those signs. He said the liberals were purposely misunderstanding that statement. There were, he said, many people who were afraid that when health care was controlled by the Federal government they might have to leave a doctor who had treated them for decades.

That made sense to me. I would never have gotten their message as long as I insisted in hearing only in my own language – the liberal tendency to think conservatives are not quite as smart as they are.

Okay, so where am I going with this? The Adult Ed ministry has talked over and over again about providing a forum for us to listen to each other. We don't quite know what the format would be, but we know that civility would be the watchword. We have big problems in the world. Nicholas Kristof of the NYTimes wrote a column last week saying that Colleges and Universities increasingly discriminate in hiring against conservatives. One peer-reviewed study [found](#) that one-third of social psychologists admitted that if choosing between two equally qualified job candidates, they would be inclined to discriminate against the more conservative candidate.

We know that dismissing wisdom no matter its source is folly. And we know that the Holy Spirit calls us to listen to one another, to know that none of us is empowered to decide who God loves.

## Sermon 2

Today I'm having a little problem with my sermon – I wrote it, filled three pages with 1209 words but every time I try to say it, the words scramble around on the paper. They rush to a corner of the page, huddle together on top of each other impossible to distinguish. They act like they are afraid. And it is a perfectly good sermon, too. About how we should be honest (oh, no.....there they go again). It feels like there is something the words are trying to tell me but they can't rearrange themselves internally – you know so “speak” becomes “peaks” – so they just run away and refuse to be said.

This is very confusing to me, and a little insulting. Today is Pentecost, originally a Jewish celebration held 50 days after the start of Passover. As you heard when Jessica read the scripture it was the day that we received the Holy Spirit. It came rushing in with a sound like thunder and a glow like fire. And then the incident of the languages came. People were there from all over the world, there to celebrate Pentecost. They all spoke different languages – Egyptian, Latin, Greek – but when the disciples spoke, presumably in Aramaic, each person heard in their own language – Egyptians in Egyptian, Romans in Latin, Greeks in Greek – you get it. So here we have the arrival of the Holy Spirit – virtually the beginning of the church. So today is our birthday. And what is the first action of the Holy Spirit? It is to promote communication, to remove barriers so that people can understand each other.

So, when I wrote my sermon on civility and how we should trust one another with what we (Oh, Damn – excuse me – there they go again – tilt paper – I wonder if I can put them back in place. NO.

OK, I give up – what am I doing wrong? What have I misunderstood? Learning a language is hard. You have to learn a whole new vocabulary and understand grammar – maybe for the first time. And then, there's the timing. Most schools introduce foreign languages in middle school. It's excruciating enough answering question in an average 7<sup>th</sup> grade class – but trying to say something in Spanish is a recipe for humiliation. I took French – which I came to love later in life. But I still remember Mademoiselle Courtois – a tiny French woman with a bun on the back of her head. We had to go to black board and write verb endings on it. Our school building was formally a Victorian house and still had many of the original fixtures. The French Classroom had a beautiful chandelier. I rarely made it to the board with banging my head on it. It takes a lot for a 7<sup>th</sup> grader to learn from her mistakes. I think I finally learned to take a different path when Mademoiselle Courtois said in her high pitched English. Mademoiselle Arnaud – If you would spend less time growing and more time studying you would be a much better student.

So, back to these rebellious words. It is clear that communication is at the heart of the Christian Church. My sermon supported that – talking about how we should talk honestly with each other. There. I think I've figured out how to fool these.....no, there they go again. What can be wrong? I'm urging us to speak honestly and to listen openly. WAIT, WAIT come back.....Wait a minute one of the words is still there. LISTEN. Yes, I got that. Yeah.

I have to apologize. It's embarrassing struggling with a sermon in the pulpit, struggling with a sermon which is perfectly good. I'm sorry. What are you doing? The word LISTEN is hoping up and down. YES, I got it. We are called to LISTEN to one another. And, not to be too dense – doesn't that mean that we have to speak as well. OH, for GOODNESS sake – stop jumping around.

Talking and listening – understanding. Being aware of your own language. “I must be on to something here cause the words are staying still.” That our primary call is to listen. But what about speaking.....isn't that.....OK, OK. Listening to someone as if they were speaking in our own language. Listening is hard. I'm not sure that .....ok, ok calm down.

I know for myself that real listening – understanding, trying to understand what someone else says, really, is hard. Sometimes we listen with only half our attention, distracted by things around us, letting our to do list run in our head. Other times, especially when we disagree, we

listen only to pick up the points we need to dispute what the other is saying. BUT that was what I was saying in my sermon. No???? Wait, words come back. I think I'm getting this.

Listening, real listening, requires will, the desire to understand, the intention of connecting, not politeness – maybe even interrupting – not to speak – but to ask clarifying questions, to make sure that we are hearing in our own language. Oh, my – these words are jumping up and down – they are so happy.

So, hearing in our own language is not hearing what we want to hear but being aware of what words mean in our language and selecting the correct one. Doing the hard work of hearing what is really being said. And being clear about what you are saying.....All right – all right. It is about listening. Listening. That is what the Holy Spirit inaugurated the church with. If we only worry about how well we are listening, communication will happen. If we only worry about if we are loving, love will prevail everywhere.