

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Day of Pentecost
20 May 2018

Scripture readings:

Acts 2:1-21 Psalm 104:25-35, 37 Romans 8:22-27 John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Today is Pentecost. You know that a Pentagon is a building with five sides. You know the Greek word *pente* which means five. Today is fifty days from Easter, the celebration of the resurrection. The red balloons tied to the pews are a symbol of the tongues of fire that descended on the people at Pentecost - an interesting image, flames of inspiration. Yesterday at the royal wedding the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, spoke a lot about fire. If it were up to me and he had asked me - but he didn't, and it shocked me that he didn't [*laughter*] - I would have not added that whole parenthetical thing at the end about fire. But I think I know why he did it. It was so that we could use it today about the importance of fire - its dangers as well as its benefits. There is a book called *When the World was Lit Only by Fire*. Can you imagine what that was like? That was not too long ago when there were no electric lights.

We are celebrating God's ability to come, to descend upon people everywhere and be present with them and enter them - their hearts, their beings, their bodies - and live with them. Why would that be important in the hopeless world that we live in today? Did you get the piece that I sent from Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* and from the Presiding Bishop? I forwarded it to a friend who is so hopeless about the world today, and it gave him inspiration. The video was so exciting that Diane Jones and Kent Fairfield, who were here at the eight o'clock mass, want to use it as a series among us so that we can explore the messages that it contains.

Here is this business of the Holy Spirit descending and people - foreigners - understand each other in their own tongues. On the 18th of May in 1975 which was Pentecost Sunday, the day I was ordained, was the only day I have ever in my life had hives. I think that may be a better image of Pentecost than balloons. I was ordained in a congregation where everyone spoke and understood English, but there was still a group of people who chose - out of preference and *auld lang syne* and cultural respect - to continue to worship in German. And that in a neighborhood that was 90-plus percent Hispanic. And a lot of those people spoke no English. They were recent immigrants. They were people who were primarily from Cuba who were given sanctuary and refuge in this country by the governments of Dade County in Florida and Hudson County in New Jersey. At the first planning session we had before I was there a year, they verbalized their desire to stay there and to minister to their neighbors who were Hispanic. I said, "*How are you going to do that.*" And they said, "*You're going to learn Spanish, pastor!*" So within the first months of being there, I was in Mexico to begin my Spanish language education. It took ten years more for the German thing to completely obviate itself, and it took three or four attempts to get the Hispanic work started - which I'm pleased to say still continues and flourishes in that place to this day. Not bragging, but trying to make a useful illustration about how in that place it was possible to respect and disrespect other people's languages and cultures. I've told you this story before, but I'd love to do it again: I remember very clearly one day in the church kitchen a woman saying in a broad German-American accent, "*Vye don't they learn to spick Enklish de vay vee dit?*" Well, they are learning. It takes time.

In this selection from Acts today we hear about people being able to understand cross-linguistics, and let's not forget the fact of cultural and economic differences. They're all a part of that, you know. We have an end-paragraph to the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis which I'm never happy with. I don't like the story of the Tower of Babel because difference in languages is used as God's condemnation of people for being proud of trying to reach God by building a tower. I have a different bead on differences of language and culture. I think they are God's gift to us and to everybody else so that we don't die of boredom. If everybody spoke and did the same thing that I do, I think that would be born of the devil, frankly, and you know what they say - "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." So let's get busy. God provides us with this rich smorgasbord, panoply, of languages and cultures, customs and clothing, experiences and opportunities that belong to other people which can be pleasures for us if we are willing to learn and share them and are confident enough in our own to believe that we have something to share.

In the Acts text we hear that "*Even upon my slaves, both men and women...*" Speaking about de-valued human beings - not just slaves, but *women!* God says, "*Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour*

out my Spirit.” Even those whom you do not value, those who speak different languages, who have different cultures, people whom you see as slaves and property rather than as human beings, even *they* shall prophesy. They shall be my voice of good news in this world today.

I sat in front of the tv yesterday for several reasons watching that wedding in tears. And one of the realities that occurred to me when the gospel choir sang was what we just read about in this text. “*I will pour out my Spirit upon slaves, men and women.*” Now in places like St. George’s Chapel, Windsor, and certain cathedrals are what are known as choirs of men and boys. I’m pleased to say in our connection with our friends in Bristol, that’s one of the first cathedrals to let girls in. And, by the way, the canon’s cathedral was the first cathedral where women were ordained in England.

At that wedding yesterday at the core, the center, the seat of empire, in St. George’s Chapel, where several former crowned heads of England are buried (among them Henry VIII), the children of slaves and people in this century who have certainly still not yet been treated fully equally - sang and proclaimed the word of God’s good news to the symbols of oppression and hatred and prejudice and ignorance - albeit moneyed. One of the most moving images to me was the mother of the bride, in all her blackness, sitting across from the royal family in quiet integrity, making them look - in some cases - like the bunch of clowns they really are - pocketbooks notwithstanding.

There was, for me, this business of the word of God belonging to all people everywhere at all times, and the slave tradition of singing the gospel was clear - and that was a mixed choir and the conductor was a woman. In these very, very subtle ways there was a radical expression of the gospel in places that are used to very highly organized religious behavior but where there have been these vacuums which were filled for a moment. That in itself was a voice of hope and joy and importance.

You know, folks, we are in a diocese which when it gathers in convention annually still is completely white and completely conducts its business in English. In a diocese where there are urban centers such as Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Wilkes-Barre, Hazelton, Scranton, Stroudsburg...and Hamlin - how’s that for an urban center? And I take a certain amount of real pride, frankly, that a couple of years ago the only black delegate at our diocesan convention was Melvina and her husband - from St John’s in the woods!

There is a message of truth and reality which continues to need to be spoken to power. You know, we’re about ready to have an annual meeting, and you will hear things about those who have left with their offerings and maybe it’s now not the time to talk politics. Well, I’m not talking politics; I’m talking gospel. And I welcome the conversation - the civil conversation of how what it is we read in scripture is in any way contrary...

One of the secrets to communicating across cultural and linguistic divides is this: the face, the human face. There were scientific studies a number of years ago that concluded that there is a universal language of the face. One of the emotions that is most universally and easily understood is disdain. Without a spoken word I can let people know I don’t like them. That is precisely the story of Pentecost. With the same power we can let people know that we love them.

A wall between us and Mexico is a face of disdain. I’m sorry. It’s a public, political, national face of disdain. It is the embodiment of hatred and prejudice and fear and ignorance. So are the fences around reservations. So are the divisions between Christians who worship in this church and not in that one.

We know how to be superior and to disdain those who are different. But the message of Pentecost is that without being able to speak anybody else’s language, we are, in fact, capable of communicating what God’s love for us is like, how that has changed our lives, and how it is we value *you* because we acknowledge that we are not deserving recipients of God’s love. We are unworthy recipients of God’s love. So the question is not whether or not *you* are worthy of God’s love. The question is why in the world have *I* been the recipient of such love. And I don’t ever expect an answer for that. Why does a mother love her miserable child? I will never know, but that that child is loved will be known in how that child grows up and lives.

So I don’t think tongues of fire has everything to do with learning another language and speaking to people. You know, the interesting thing about learning another language is if you try, your efforts will be appreciated. I think as Christians we understand this - that we can’t fix the world and redeem it, but if we try, our efforts will be understood that we are trying to share a love we have received, however feebly and imperfectly and all the rest of it. But the business is showing a face to the world which is not a face of disdain. It may be a face of inquiry. It certainly

must be a face of affirmation, a face of understanding if not pity - but certainly not a face of disdain or hatred or fear or ignorance - or the gospel we believe, teach and confess is a crock and we're not Christians.

We are given the Spirit to communicate the truth, and the truth is simple. It is the truth that Bishop Michael Curry spoke about at the wedding yesterday. It is a useful sermon at every wedding, funeral, baptism, confirmation, and mass in the world - a simple equation, a simple Christian basic building block: Where love is, God is there - whether or not it's the kind of God you believe, teach, and confess or not or understand. It doesn't matter. If there's love there, there is God there. And if there is not love there, God is not there. And the only test for us as Christian people is "Does this communicate love or disdain?" Period. If it's love, then it is of God. If it is not of love, then it is not of God. That is basic, and there are no excuses or ways around it. Is that embarrassing truth? Well, at times it can be, but does that embarrassment change the truth? Absolutely not!

So the gift of the Holy Spirit is simply this, friends - that when Jesus perceived and preached and shared - which cost him his life - that God loves me and you and everybody else in the world, that is the truth which is given to us in whatever language we speak throughout the world to share wherever we are in the world with whomever we happen to be. Period. That's it! And so it is I find it easier - and I think the church does, too - to believe in this business of the Spirit which comes to us than I find it easy to believe that Jesus was God who was here for a while and then disappeared. I don't like to have to play peekaboo with God.

When we get to the creed, we'll see that they had to work a long and hard time to come up with all those words about Jesus in the middle paragraph. When we get to the part about the Holy Spirit, we say, "*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father...*" Oh, the Orthodox Church says, "*from the Father.*" We say, "*from the Father and the Son.*" Something else to fight about.

And so we understand that to be the Body of Christ that the business of making Jesus' message present in the world today has very little to do with what we say but with how we say it - how we look upon the world. You know those words of Teresa of Avila: "*Christ has no eyes but ours to look compassion on the world.*" The other option is disdain. And so it is we accept these tongues of fire and flames of truth and the presence of a living God right into our own bodies so that we might be changed and that the world, by us, might also be changed.

There was a little black girl in Los Angeles who was upset that the ad for dishwashing liquid said that women of the world were fighting grease. She wrote to Proctor and Gamble and said, "*The boys at school taunt me because they say that's my job to do the dishes.*" Proctor and Gamble changed the ad to say, "**People** of the world fight grease" (meaning in the dishpan). That was Meghan Markle at eleven years old.

Not that I'm encouraging this, but there she was - divorced, black... When I vacuumed yesterday and changed my bed, I thought, "*She'll never have to do any of these things again in her life.*" Is there a way you could figure that out for me? [laughter]

But here we have it. The point being that as an example for us as Christians - just believing and sticking to and preaching and sharing and loving the truth can work wonders in this world, and it does among us right here. This is the place I love to be with you and the place that we know does a very fine job of welcoming those who walk in the door whoever and however they may be. We don't even kick out clergy! [laughter]

And if I were to have a response to anybody who worried about the offerings who have left for political reasons, I would say, "*Look in the pews among your brothers and sisters and see who is coming, not who is gone, as we pursue together the truth,* - and that doesn't mean that I am the sole repository of that truth - but we do come together with the gospel to see where God would have us go. And I think we went a step further yesterday at St. George's Chapel in Windsor, and I know that every time we come together here, we go another step in that direction - joyfully!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.