

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Day of Pentecost
15 May 2016

Scripture readings:

Acts 2:1-21 Psalm 104:25-35, 37 Revelation 22:1a, 12-14, 16-17, 20-21 John 14:8-17

I don't know who writes scripture. We sometimes get an idea, but I don't know where this idea comes from that people can't be drunk at nine o'clock in the morning. *[laughter]* Oh well, I guess if you're writing the Bible...

But what was that all about? There's something that's peculiar about what these people are seeing and thinking and believing and something peculiar about how they are acting, and it has something to do with being understood, and it has something to do with what the early Church understood about foreigners, people who didn't speak our language, and it had to do with the ability to understand.

Now I grew up in a household where there were remnants of Pennsylvania Dutch, Pennsylvania German, that could still fly around. And we all know how languages like that are used to speak behind people's backs while you're speaking in front of them. You know how that goes - things the kids shouldn't hear and all the rest of it. And you know when learning a new language, you always learn the dirty words first. So even if you only know a little bit, often knowing another language is seen as a way of keeping secrets, obfuscating the truth, hiding something.

I remember the story of the first black man possibly to integrate Lutheran Sunday Schools in New York City who had been a very early member of the Sunday School in the church in the South Bronx where I worked - Ashley Bryan, who's still alive at the age of ninety-something and lives on Cranberry Island in Maine and is a very, very well-known artist. I remember in my internship, days before I was finished with seminary, days before I was ordained, when he talked about being in an elevator with women. Well, the church he integrated happened to be a German church, and Ashley happened to speak and understand German. He was in an elevator in New York City with a bunch of old German women, and they were talking about him being there in German, thinking he didn't understand what they were saying.

There's an illustration that I've often shared with you here. I remember in the church kitchen in West New York where there was a German-speaking congregation. Forty-one years ago when I was ordained they were still worshiping in German and English in a neighborhood that was ninety-plus percent Hispanic. In their first planning retreat the first year I was there they decided that they wanted to work with the people in the neighborhood. I said, "*How are you going to do that?*" They said, "*Well, you're going to learn Spanish.*" *[laughter]* I didn't know you could say no to stuff like that. Within a year I was in Mexico. That wasn't bad. But I remember in that church kitchen one Sunday morning hearing, "*Vye don't they learn to spick English the way vee dit?*" *[laughter]* Thick German accent asking why the first generation immigrant people in those neighborhoods didn't speak English well. Those neighborhoods were always filled with immigrants because that's where everybody got off the boat - in Hoboken and all the ports of New York.

But there also was a real understanding of the immigrant reality, and I was pleased to have those exposures in the early days of my ministry because when I grew up in Allentown it was virtually 110,000 blue-collar white people. I went to a high school of three thousand kids. and I don't think there were three black kids in the whole school. That was an education I needed because I learned that differences might be pause for thought but I always received more than I gave and I always was enriched by these learnings.

And here we have this extraordinary Pentecost story where people are understanding beyond the boundaries of language. “*Now there were devout Jews...*” (Is there any other kind?) “*...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, ‘Aren’t these all Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’*” But here’s the point: Why don’t they learn to speak English the way we did? “*They*” - that’s the problem in the first place, isn’t it? “*They*” and “*We*.”

A little piece of information: In my first parish we started a Spanish language work in a congregation that was speaking German and English in an English-speaking congregation that had people from fifteen different nations using English as a *lingua franca*, a common language. The first thing we did, before we even worshiped in Spanish, was to start English classes for speakers of other languages because of justice issues. In this country or any other country, if you don’t speak the language of the country in which you are, you will not have an economic opportunity. Doors close.

So the business of understanding is learning, but learning takes place on both sides. And who would you rather be - a person who speaks only one language and isn’t sure what other people are saying or a person who looks for people who speak other languages than your own so you have an opportunity to practice communicating. One of the great gifts of a multi-cultural parish was on Easter Sunday morning when everybody brought his or her different kind of Easter bread. The bread of life is delicious and different and beautiful and nourishing and lovely.

And so this Pentecost experience may have had something to do with speaking other languages. It may *not* have. But remember this, folks, as we continue to go through the contortions of presidential elections, *et cetera* in our country, that it’s frequently a desire for us to say this is a Christian nation, but when you make that equation and you say that means that everybody here has to speak the same language, that doesn’t square very well with the scriptural text, does it? Where it’s not *your* job to learn but *our* job to communicate. We have a gift to share with you, and you bring what you’ve got as a gift to us. It’s not, “*I’ve got something for you. You’re empty. I will fill you. I’m right, you’re wrong. This is our way. You do it our way and then you’re welcome here.*” It’s a matter of: “*We have been given by God the gift of difference so that we don’t get bored, so that we have something to talk about, so that we have something to learn, so that we have something to exchange, so that we have something not only to give, but something to receive.*”

I think the real truth of this first text is found in the gospel. Listen to this one and, by the way, I think this gospel says things that I don’t believe Jesus ever said. I couldn’t prove it, but I don’t think Jesus walked around and said, “*If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen God the Father.*” I just don’t think he said that. He may have, but I don’t think so. You don’t have to agree with me. I think the early Church said, “*Ahh, in Jesus we saw God.*” And at that time who was God? God the Father, the Creator, the gray-bearded, old white man on a cloud in heaven. And then Jesus showed up and they saw a curly, hook-nosed, olive-skinned Jew. “*Ah, here’s God too!*” So I think that’s the early Church speaking, but here’s the truth of this gospel text that I find thrilling: Jesus says, “*Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*” And then this incredible phrase, “*But if you don’t believe that...*” And that might be the early Church saying that’s something hard for a lot of people to swallow. Maybe a lot of people won’t get what we believe about Jesus. “*But if you do not believe that, then believe this.*” And what are they asked to believe? What is the world asked to believe? And this is going to be tough for Lutherans to swallow. “*Believe me because of the works themselves.*” Believe what you will about Jesus, whether or not that’s God the Father in the person of this guy. Believe that or not. But if you don’t believe that, believe what you see Christian people doing - which is not knee-jerk reaction, which is not allowing their prejudices to be uninformed, which is not saying our fears are the planks of our faith but, as the text said today, our faith gets rid of fear - the fear of difference, the fear of others, the fear of strangers.

One of the things I learned in all of those multi-cultural situations - which I genuinely thank God for allowing me to be in over forty-one years - was that whether or not anybody speaks the language I speak verbally or I speak their's, people understand kindness. People know the difference between a smile and a frown. People understand the difference between a stiff handshake and an affectionate embrace. People *know* when they're loved and liked and welcomed and wanted. And they know when they're not. And that's before we ever say a word. We call it body language, and we all have bodies. Now this is the Festival of the Holy Spirit, but I'm one of those people who has to see it to believe it. I know there are things I can't see. There was a day when the wind could mess my hair. You know, that kind of thing.

But the reality is we have all been given bodies, and I don't know who or what it is I may or might have been or will be without a body. I only know myself as this frame. And I don't think it's very hard for us to agree that you can take all the parts and put them together but there is something that adds up to more than the sum of the parts in terms of a human being. We know the difference between life and death. When a body is not filled with life, it's disposed of. That same body which we used to communicate and share and love and do all the things we do as human beings, becomes a health hazard as soon as it is dead and needs to be disposed of or it creates problems for the rest of the living. So we bury the dead and cremate the dead. I don't think embalming the dead is a very healthy option. Did you ever hear of Fairview Cemetery in North Jersey? It's a huge, old cemetery on a hillside with Route 1 and 9, the truck route, at the bottom. Every time there's a heavy rain, I've wondered what the runoff was. *[laughter]*

We are, fortunately, more than the sum of our parts, and I'm O.K. with calling that the spirit. But left to our own devices our spirit would be selfish, turned inward, concerned only for myself, my survival, my pleasure, my enjoyment. It would be uninformed that my real self-interest is when I'm interested in the welfare of everyone, when there are more and better people to speak to than just the other half of my personality, when I am in relationship and in community with others. And so it is at this Festival of the Holy Spirit, I think it's worth pausing to remember what happens.

The tradition in the Church is that at the reading of the gospel either on Ascension Day, which was Thursday a week ago, or on Pentecost Sunday, the Easter candle is extinguished. Now that candle was lit at the Easter Vigil and technically burns unextinguished for fifty days during the entire Easter season as a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. Well, after Easter we remember all of these post-resurrection appearances of Jesus: on the beach frying fish for breakfast for the guys who were fishing. There are some who believe that the early Eucharists of the Church used fish. I'm not for it. *"I've got this problem. I forgot to take the bone out."* *[laughter]* On the road to Emmaus, they're breaking bread, they're having lunch. *"Oh, that's Jesus with us! In the upper room where they're frightened, grieving the loss of the center of their community, grieving the death of this beautiful man with his gorgeous message who is the victim of jealousy, hatred, ignorance and prejudice. And then in the upper room they're aware that he's present with them, and Thomas says, "I wasn't there. I don't believe a thing you say."* And the next time they're together Thomas is able to go into the body of Jesus with his finger, with his hand. And you see what I believe is he's going into the body of Jesus by being with his brothers and sisters in Christ. And isn't that what we do when we gather here? We come into the corporation, the body of Christ with our hands and feet and hearts and livers and pancreases and brains and eyes and ears and tongues and noses and all of that stuff that makes up our body, and we join our bodies to each other spiritually, and that is God's gift and that's what we celebrate today - the descent of the Holy Spirit, the gift of God's presence with us in our bodies. And the gift of the ability to see God present in each other is God's gift at Pentecost.

In the Easter season essentially we've created a separation. We've wondered what to do as the Church when Jesus is gone, and I know enough of all of our stories and you know enough of mine to know that when we

grieve - and we all grieve - I believe we grieve the loss of God, the loss of a vision of God, the loss of another person who has spoken God's love to us, who has been God present with us. And that's what the Church was doing after the resurrection. Where is he? And they perceived him with them when they were together, and they perceived him with them especially when they shared a meal. And so every time we gather we share a meal so that we might see the work of the spirit in the body that we constitute which is what we call Christ's body, the Church, so that our bodies might do exactly what Mary's body did. Protestants often have real trouble in theological discussion when you talk about Mary as the Mother of God. I can take a lot but that's not one that I can swallow very easily. The problem is a mis-translation from the Greek of the word *theotokos* which doesn't mean so much the Mother of God, but the bearer of God. This is why I think we shoot ourselves in the foot as Christians when we ignore that person from scripture who, as a young child, simply said to an obnoxious, unbelievable, inappropriate, wild, ridiculous belief that God asked her to be pregnant with God's self, but she simply says, "*Yup, O.K., You're God. You know what you're doing, Go ahead.*" And so she bears in her flesh the living Christ.

On this Pentecost Sunday I invite you to believe that by the action of the Holy Spirit - not by anything *you* do or the organizational Church does - but the *real* Church, what *we* do is this: by belief and action of the Holy Spirit we come to this table to recognize that Christ is, in fact, alive, resurrected, present with us, and that we come here by the act and ability and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each one of us to be impregnated just like Mary, each of us to become a *theotokos*, a bearer of God, in our fat, funny, old, male, female, black, white, blue, disabled, wealthy, poor, happy, sad bodies that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit after the body of Christ has disappeared in the Ascension to become that body in this world and to bear that body into this world by eating and believing. That's why the Church calls this a sacrament. One of the definitions of a sacrament is that it's an act of God, not an act of people, and that this is something God wants to do with us, that God wants to come into us and live in us so that God might be known by others with whom we communicate and others with whom we share a smile rather than a frown, with others whom we embrace rather than offer a stiff handshake, with others we love rather than hate, with others we are willing to come to know rather than be afraid of, with others who will speak the same language of love and acceptance and beauty and joy without knowing a word of English or Spanish or German or Greek or Hebrew or Latin, *et cetera*.

Pentecost is about communicating the love of God to all people everywhere all the time. How do we do that? By God's Grace, by the gift of God's Spirit, not by our own ability, and by simply saying as Mary did, "*Yes, Lord, be it done to me according to your will. Use me your way.*"

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