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**THE DAY OF PENTECOST**

**June 8, 2014**

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## **“Clear Communication”**

*(Acts 2:7-11)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And they were amazed and astonished, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and 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 Arabians – we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God’” (Acts 2:7-11).*

## **Collect of the Day**

O God, on this day You once taught the hearts of Your faithful people by sending them the light of Your Holy Spirit. Grant us in our day by the same Spirit to have a right understanding in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy consolation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

A number of years ago, I found myself facing the most difficult communication challenge of my ministry. I was down in the youth room, sitting on the floor. About a dozen preschoolers and kindergartners were sitting around me. It was VBS week; I was the appointed story teller. The story of the day was that of Rahab. Remember her? She was a prostitute. She lived in Jericho. Her little house of ill repute was attached to the city wall. Two Jewish spies were sent to scope out the city and they chose to stay in Rahab's house, which makes sense because her neighbors would have been accustomed to the sight of strangers coming and going at all hours. When some soldiers of the city came sniffing around for the spies Rahab hid them under bundles of flax on the roof. In return the spies promised to spare Rahab and her family from the coming destruction. All she needed to do was hang a red cord out of the window to let the invading army know which home was hers.

Now, my job as story teller was 1.) retell that story in a way that makes sense to preschoolers. 2.) extol the faith of Rahab for hiding the spies. 3.) point out that though she was a prostitute, she was also an ancestor of Jesus. And 4.) tie it all together with the overarching theme which, I think had something to do with super heroes. The schedule said I had 20 minutes. To help me do all that, I was given a little red cord to use as a visual aide.

A number of thoughts went through my mind: 1.) They didn't teach me how to do this at the seminary. 2.) I want my mommy. 3.) I'd also like to have a few words with that publishing house. And 4.) Make sure no video of this get back to my brothers. My first sentence was okay. "Rahab was a baaaad

woman.” After that, it all went downhill.

Have you ever considered how many problems there can be with the process of communication? A lot can go wrong. There can be problems from the one who is sending a message: maybe the sender is a Pastor who’s not particularly gifted at teaching little children. Or maybe the sender is a young woman who is in the habit of mumbling, or an older man whose thoughts are confused, not well formulated.

Or maybe the problem is on the receiving end. Somebody is talking to you on the phone but you’re writing an e-mail at the same time and so you missed an important part of the message. Or someone is trying to persuade you of something, but you’re not really listening because you’re busy crafting your next retort, your next argument. Or physically, maybe you don’t hear as well anymore. White noise in the background – like the soda machine downstairs cycling on and off, forces you to guess what someone just said.

There are sending problems and there are receiving problems. And then there’s the message itself. It might be too difficult for the audience, or too predictable, so your audience gets bored and checks out. Or maybe words are at variance with non-verbal cues: “I’m fine!” we say. Then there are all those idioms that make sense to us but not to foreigners, like, “It’s time for me to hit the sack.” Cell phones click in and out of reception. And the exclamation point you used in an e-mail was supposed to communicate humor and surprise, but was received as anger.

So much can go wrong. Now, add to these the challenges if the sender and the receiver speak different languages, maybe the one Aramaic and the other Latin. Add to that the challenge of a Christian witnessing the message of Jesus Christ to a non-Christian who has never heard of Jesus Christ before . . . Add to that hearts that are, by nature, stone cold, hostile even to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With all those things working against us, it’s a miracle that anyone believes in Jesus Christ. And that’s precisely the point of

Pentecost. Faith is a miracle worked by the Holy Spirit, through the message itself, but also in the sender, and in the receiver. Said another way, if the followers of Jesus are to make disciples of all nations, they're going to need a lot of help. They're going to need the Helper, the Holy Spirit.

In our text it's a month and a half after Passover, which was when Jesus was arrested and crucified. The disciples are back in Jerusalem. They have been in the presence of the risen Lord. They know he isn't dead anymore but very much alive. And they are waiting, still lying low, not wanting to draw attention to themselves. Jerusalem is now celebrating the Festival of Weeks, also called Pentecost, which celebrates the completion of the spring harvest. That means Jerusalem is once again filled with pilgrims from all over the world: Mesopotamia, Judea, Asia, Egypt, Libya.

Suddenly, something happens; something uncanny, extraordinary, mysterious. It's one of those experiences that doesn't translate well or explain well. Luke speaks of rushing wind and tongues of fire. The followers of Jesus suddenly find their voices and the courage to use them. Suddenly they can speak fluently in languages they never learned.

The miracle of Pentecost is not about speaking in tongues, also called glossolalia. Pentecost is not about that babbling prayer language. It's not about chaos and confusion. Quite the opposite. Pentecost is about clarity and understanding. The giving and the receiving of the message was happening successfully. Some were speaking the Gospel crystal clarity. Others were understanding it and taking it to heart.

Luke wants us to know that the whole world was there, with all its marvelous diversity; racial, cultural, linguistic, which means God now wants all people to have his Word of salvation. It isn't just for the Jews anymore. And Luke wants us to know that through the work of the Holy Spirit, very diverse people were able to become a community with hardly anything else in common but the

Christian faith. That happened because the Holy Spirit was working on both sides of the equation. Those following Jesus were gifted with foreign languages, but also with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those listening to the disciples were gifted with hearing the Gospel in their own native tongues, but also with hearts and minds that the Holy Spirit opened to hear the Gospel rightly. The Holy Spirit enabled them to understand the message, and to believe in it. By the end of the day, about 3,000 souls were baptized.

Today, most people don't like to talk much about the Holy Spirit. It makes us sound like religious freaks. So we don't talk much about the Holy Spirit, but at the same time everyone loves to use the words "spiritual" and "spirituality". Speaking about the Holy Spirit makes us sound like we're part of a cult, whereas spirituality sounds fashionable. Jennifer Lopez told *Allure Magazine*, "I have lots of spiritual books around. I don't even know the titles . . . . At the end of the day, it's all about being, like, a good person – centered, focused, and at peace." (*New York Times*, 1/23/01).

I don't mean to pick on Jennifer Lopez; I'm glad she's centered, focused, at peace and, like, a good person, but that's not what the Holy Spirit is all about. The Holy Spirit is not about the hazy notion of being spiritual and Pentecost is not about the intentional confusion and blur of spirituality. Pentecost is about clarity and understanding and precision. At Pentecost, diversity was overcome by the power to speak the Gospel in a foreign tongue and to hear and understand and even believe the Gospel in one's own language, one's own accent.

Some of that same miracle is happening today. The Holy Spirit still works on both sides of the equation. Many pastors, before they begin a sermon will pray the words of Psalm 19, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (v. 14). He's praying the Holy Spirit to shape and choose and edit his words in such a way that they are acceptable.

But the work of the Holy Spirit is also on the receiving side. In Romans 10, Paul writes, “Faith comes from hearing the message” (v. 17). And that’s about more than just sound waves rattling the ear drum. It’s about heart and mind making sense of it all and apprehending it for oneself. That cannot happen without the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor. 2:14, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” And again, in 1 Cor. 12, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (v. 3). Therefore, among Luther’s most important words are these: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel and enlightened me with His gifts” (*Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed.*)

Pentecost is about the miracle of communication and clarity for both the sender and receiver. So, in the General Prayer of the Church we often pray, “...grant and preserve to your holy Church throughout the world purity of doctrine and faithful pastors to preach Your Word with power.” (We pray for the senders. Then we pray also for the receivers.) “Help all who hear the Word rightly to understand and truly to believe it.”

We need to pray for that communication process. Again, so much can go wrong. As part of 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation I require the kids to turn in 20 sermon notes. The main objective is to summarize the Law and the Gospel of each sermon. When I read those I find it remarkable what the kids hear me saying. Somewhere in the process, something went amuck. Based on those notes, Spanish Inquisitors would have burned me at the stake a thousand times over.

So, when it all works . . . when the message of Jesus Christ is faithfully communicated, and received by faith, give thanks, because it’s a little miracle. The Holy Spirit has been at work. Faith is not a decision. It has always been a

gift. Where there is faith, the Holy Spirit has been working in the sender, in the receiver, and in the message! Thanks be to God. Amen.

