

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Learning to Listen”  
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Pentecost—June 9, 2019

Lessons: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2: 1-21

The miracle of Pentecost is that a bunch of simple and scared people who were hidden away by themselves were suddenly given the power to proclaim the mighty deeds of God in a way that they could be understood by everyone present. There were people there from every part of the known world and they heard in their own language about God’s great deeds of power. This story of Pentecost is one of the reasons that our Protestant forebears were so eager to translate the Bible into the everyday language of the people. It is one of the reasons that continuing new translations of the Bible are a good thing. Some of you know that I love the King James Version of the Bible, especially the Psalms. But even though that language may dance in my heart, it does not for others and for them to hear the mighty deeds of God in their own language may require a new translation. That’s part of the message of Pentecost.

I also try to use language that is gender inclusive, especially when reading Scripture. Some people think that is simply being politically correct, however, too many people find offence in our old language, and for them to hear the good news of the Gospel, we need to use other words. They too deserve to hear the mighty acts of God in their own language. That’s part of our Presbyterian heritage and it is part of the message of Pentecost.

Pentecost is also about the disciples speaking in tongues—not speaking a lot of gibberish that could not be understood, but rather speaking in every known language of the day so that again the message of God’s grace and mercy and power might be heard and understood by all people. Sometimes when this aspect of Pentecost is emphasized, it gets misunderstood and Pentecost is assumed to be about disciples speaking in a kind of unintelligible babble as you might find in some Pentecostal Churches. That is not what our text says. It says that the disciples spoke in other languages that were understood by all those who had gathered in Jerusalem from every possible town and country in that time.

For a great many years, the Christian celebration of Pentecost has been paired with the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis where God confused the speech of the people. Pentecost is seen as the reversal of what happened at Babel. And yet, as amazing as it is that the disciples suddenly start speaking in all the languages represented in Jerusalem at that time, even more amazing is that fact that people are given the ability to hear.

Back in Genesis, God says: “Come let us confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” The Hebrew word used here is “shema.” Come let us confuse their speech so that they will not “shema” one another’s speech. That word “shema” is usually translated “hear.” Any observant Jew would associate that word with a passage in Deuteronomy that I often read at baptisms: “Hear O Israel—Shema Y’Israel—the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” At Babel the people lost the ability to hear. On Pentecost the people regained their ability to hear, to listen, to understand.

That is a gift we need today. We don’t hear very well. We aren’t very good listeners. We are surrounded by so much background noise, so much busy-ness that we miss a great deal of what is really happening in the world. A number of years ago, one friend sent me a story from the Washington Post about the world-famous violinist Joshua Bell playing at the L’Enfant Plaza Metro Station in

Washington during rush hour. He did what many musicians do. He opened his case “to catch the change or dollar bills of those on their way to work — played six classical pieces, and almost 1,100 people passed by.

“The results were quite astonishing. Hundreds of people hurried by, many of them talking on cell phones, and of the people who passed by, only seven people stopped in their morning rush to take in the extraordinary music he was playing; ... Only one person actually recognized the classical music icon. Perhaps the most startling of these results was what happened with one demographic group: every single time a child passed by, he or she stopped to watch, and every single time a parent scooted the child away and encouraged that child to move on!” Incredible beauty and greatness surround us and we miss them all the time because we don’t listen very well.

At the political level, we are so divided across so many lines, that we can’t hear each other. If there is any lesson that the church might teach to those involved in politics it would be the lesson that you don’t have to agree about every issue to get along. Frankly many in Washington know that, but their constituencies don’t allow them to be overly public about that. Wherever you may stand on the issues of our day, you are still a child of God—precious, honored and loved.

Right here in Wilmington, where too many people are dying and too many of our own citizens are doing the killing, I wonder if anyone has ever really listened to those who now horrifically solve their problems with violence. Has anyone ever really affirmed their humanity by listening? Had anyone taken that time would they be so violent today? I don’t know the answer to the question of violence, but I wonder. How might God’s gift of listening actually make our communities stronger and safer?

At an individual level we can celebrate this gift from God by becoming better listeners ourselves. How many times have you asked the question, “how are you?” but didn’t really wait for or want an answer? What might it be like if you took the time today or next week to ask that of someone and then really listen? That could be one of the ways to make this an even stronger congregation. Dream of how it might feel if people in this place had their humanity affirmed because someone took the time really to listen to them.

The miracle of Pentecost is that people from every place and every walk of life could actually hear in their own native language the mighty deeds of God. Go listen today. Listen for God’s presence at the market, at work, on all sides of our politics, in the lives of people who are suffering here in this city, and in the lives of those who surround you every day. Listen to them all, for God’s Spirit has been poured out on all flesh.

Let us pray: Open our ears that we may hear the voices of truth thou sendest clear....Silently now we wait for thee, ready our God thy will to see, open our ears, illumine us, Spirit divine. Amen.