

Speaking With Strangers, Day of Pentecost (B) – 2012 - SERMONS THAT WORK

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As a child, were you ever warned not to speak to strangers? This warning can be very helpful, and keeping our children safe is so important. Today, though, we hear that Pentecost is about when it is really good to speak with strangers.

That first Pentecost happened in the city of Jerusalem, but today's story from Acts really refers to two cities.

The first city our story refers to is the city of Babel. It's not mentioned in Acts, but it's there, right beneath the surface, and the first readers of the Acts of the Apostles would not have missed it. We are less familiar with the Biblical stories, and may need to look it up. And you can sometime – you'll find it in Genesis 11. Way back near the beginning of the Biblical story, we find the city of Babel. The story of Babel is told by our ancient Hebrew forebears in faith to explain the multiplicity of peoples and languages and nations. How is it, they asked even then, that humans must have had one common beginning, and yet, look at us – people speak so many languages, appear in so many colors, are spread all over the world? How is it, that if we all at some time came from one common beginning, we can't understand one another – that when strangers from another land speak, it sounds like babbling to us? This is the story they told.

Way back when everyone still had one language, if you said, "bird," everyone knew bird, and rock was "rock" and sun was "sun." But the people decided to make a name for themselves. They were tired of trusting in God, and they weren't all that good at it anyway. They were tired of letting God be the source of their security and identity, so they decided to build a city, and in the middle of that city they would build a tower reaching up to the heavens and bring themselves some fame. God heard about this plan and said, "This is not good." And here's the amazing part: God said, "Nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them." In other words, if people can communicate with one another, they'll be able to do anything they put their minds to. That's how powerful the ability to communicate is. So, to save humans from themselves, God scrambles up their language. Bird is no longer "bird." Now it's also *oiseau* and *avis* and *vogel*.

And sun is also *shemesh* and *soleil* and *helios*. The people can no longer communicate; they become strangers to one another. They scatter, and the city is called Babel, because that's what it sounded like. That's city number one.

Now come to the city of Jerusalem. It's 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus has told his followers to wait together in the city because Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to be with them, to comfort them and strengthen them and guide them into all truth.

But Jesus' followers aren't the only ones in the city. Jewish pilgrims from all over the world have come to Jerusalem, because what became our Pentecost began on a Jewish holiday, 50 days after Passover, a yearly festival when the first fruit of the wheat harvest were presented, and God's covenant with Israel was celebrated and renewed. This was one of the three great festivals of the year. So faithful Jews have gathered from all over the world. Jerusalem is abuzz with the sounds of a multitude of languages.

Suddenly, to the followers of Jesus, comes the Holy Spirit. First the rush of a violent wind. Then tongues of fire rest on each of them. Then, as they are filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin to speak in other languages. Galileans speaking Persian and Latin, Arabic and Elamite. All those strangers from all over the world can hear their own native language being spoken. They can hear and understand in their very own language.

If you've ever traveled to a place where they don't speak your language, you know what a grace that was. A young couple was traveling in Europe. They were in Germany and left the rest of their study group to go explore. They got lost. It started to rain. They wandered off the edge of the map they had and had no idea where they were. It rained harder. It got cold out. It got dark. They tried to get back on to their map, but there was no one around to ask for directions. Finally they found a little restaurant, and, drenched and chilled, stepped into its light and warmth.

None of the people inside spoke English. But surprisingly, none of the people inside spoke German either. Some people in the restaurant motioned the shivering and wet couple to a table, and the couple waved their wet map. "We just need directions," they said, probably loudly, as if that would help, pointing at the map. The couple couldn't speak the locals' language; the locals' couldn't speak the couple's. But the people in the restaurant did speak kindness. They brought the couple towels and pressed hot drinks into their hands. They made sympathetic sounds and seemed to share the young people's dismay at not having the right words to communicate. The couple saw two of the men leave, holding jackets above their heads as they went out into the downpour. After awhile the men came back, accompanied by a third man, who came to the

couple's table. He spoke enough English to tell them that this was a Hungarian family restaurant, the drinks were on the house, and how to get back to where they needed to be.

In Jerusalem on Pentecost, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of being able to communicate, the obstacle of Babel was undone. On that day, the diversity of languages was not a curse, but a marvel. And this is important: God undid Babel, not by bringing the whole world back into speaking one language. Pentecost affirms the diversity of the world, the richness of the multitude of peoples and languages, and the gift when you hear and understand, when people can communicate, whether across the barriers of languages, or the barrier of simply being one stranger speaking with another.

The Book of Common Prayer summarizes the power of the Holy Spirit in this way: "The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth and enables us to grow in the likeness of Christ." And "we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation." In other words, we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we stop being strangers with God, ourselves, our neighbors, and all creation.

Today, throughout the church, we are going to welcome new members into the family of Jesus Christ through the sacrament of baptism. In this family we celebrate the gifts of Pentecost. We acknowledge and rejoice in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We recognize diversity as a good thing. We believe we can, we must, communicate – speaking and listening and making friends out of strangers. As the baptized, we make promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, not just people who look like us or talk like us or believe like us. We promise to respect the dignity of all people. We promise to love our neighbors – even people strange to us – as ourselves.

This kind of love – this kind of welcome of others, speaking and listening to others – will look very strange to people outside the family. It did on that first Pentecost. About all this harmony amongst strangers and communication across barriers and love flying around like tongues of fire caught by the wind, onlookers said, "What's going on here? They must be drunk!" When we're living with the reckless joy God makes possible, when we are emboldened to work for justice and peace among all people, when we delight in diversity, and see no one, ultimately, as a stranger, but rather as someone who bears the very image of God, they may wonder what's gotten into us. They may ridicule us. They may think we're a little strange.

Or perhaps they'll want to join us, being brought into love and harmony with God, ourselves, our neighbors, and all creation, and we'll be strangers no more.