

## In Our Own Languages

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 1999.  
Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:1-21.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

We live in *the age of communication*. Telephones, call-waiting, e-mail, pagers, backyard satellite dishes - they enable us to instantaneously communicate with men and women of every nation under heaven. We even have *SETI* - the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence - with giant satellite dishes set up around the world hoping to communicate with extra-terrestrials.

And yet how difficult it is to communicate across cultures. Some of us remember President John F. Kennedy standing at the Berlin Wall saying, "*Ich bin ein Berliner.*" He meant to say, "*I am a Berliner.*" But a German once told me that a *Berliner* is the name of a jelly donut. Some Germans in the crowd stifled laughter when they heard Kennedy say, "I'm a jelly donut." When John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, was translated into Japanese its title became, *Angry Raisins*. Makes sense. *Raisins* are dehydrated grapes. *Anger* is another word for wrath.

John Gray wrote the best seller, *Men are From Mars. Women are From Venus*. He claims men and women speak different languages making it difficult for us to communicate. A good example. Andrew has a good friend whose girl friend gave him two tickets to a *76ers* basketball game. With the tickets came a note, "*Take someone you really like.*" Wes thought, "*Andrew!*" So he and Andrew went and enjoyed the game. Soon after Wes's girl friend broke up with him. She expected him to ask her, "*someone he really liked.*" Wes complained, "*Why didn't she just say she wanted to go.*" One of the major problems between men and woman is poor communication.

Not just men and women have a difficult time communicating. Years ago a conscientious homeowner wrote to a manufacturer of cast iron pipe saying that he'd found that by pouring pure hydrochloric acid down his drain he immediately opened his grease-clogged pipes. He asked if there was any way the acid might harm the pipes. The manufacturer wrote back. "*Thank you for your letter. The effect of such acid upon ferrous-constructed materials is certain to be deleterious. We therefore strongly urge you to cease such activity in the interest of the future of*

*your plumbing.*" He read their letter and responded, thanking them for their letter, telling them he was relieved that he was doing the right thing in using the acid on the pipes. Another letter from the manufacturer: *"We fear that there may have been some miscommunication in our correspondence. Acid, of that density, applied to cast iron pipe, is certain to have dubious results. Therefore, please desist from your current practices."* The homeowner read the letter, then wrote back, thanking the company for its response, telling them once again that he was delighted that he was doing nothing to harm the pipes. Finally, the frustrated manufacturer sent a telegram: *DON'T USE ACID. IT RUSTS THE HECK OUT OF THE PIPES!* (Willimon)

Failed communication is not always so humorous. Many frustrated people give up trying to communicate with words. They turn to fists, knives, guns, bombs. I think of a movie that was influential in my life thirty years ago, *Cool Hand Luke* starring Paul Newman. At the end of the movie Luke is shot and killed by a sadistical sheriff who says sarcastically, *"What we've got here is failure to communicate."* What we have around the world in Palestine, in Yugoslavia, in Northern Ireland, is a failure to communicate.

God is extremely concerned about communication. He spoke through prophets and apostles. God, the Word, came to us in the person of Jesus. God sent the Holy Spirit to help us understand one another. Today is *Pentecost Sunday*. Pentecost Sunday celebrates the gift of communication.

Originally, *Pentecost* was a Jewish holy day. The Jewish Pentecost celebrated God's revelation of his law to Moses. It also celebrated the barley harvest in Palestine. The first Christian Pentecost came fifty days after Jesus was crucified. Jews and converts to Judaism from all over the world traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the day. *Parthians and Medes from Asia. Egyptians and Libyans from Africa. Arabs and Mesopotamians from the Middle East. Romans from Europe.* The whole world was there. How could they hope to understand one another? Then there's a rush of wind, the Holy Spirit descends, and they all hear - they understand in their own languages.

Do you believe it? Is it possible? Not just that it happened back then, but do you believe it can happen today? The wonderful gift of communication. The wonderful gift of understanding your spouse, your parent, your colleague?

Today we have in our sanctuary people from all around the world. Alla from Russia. Daoming and Chendi from the Peoples Republic of China. Elizabeth Dickey, originally from Puerto Rica. Lisa whose been all over the world and has lived in France. Ann Terry and Liz Abel spoke in American Sign language. Rich and Jim read in English. I read in Latin and Greek - the language of two ancient empires. Is the Holy Spirit powerful enough to overcome historic, deep, cultural and ethnic differences which frustrate our hearing? Is it possible for husbands and wives who haven't listened to one another all week to hear God speaking to them through their spouse? Is it possible for a father to understand the silent language of an angry son? Yes! says the church. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to overcome our deafness to one another. The Holy Spirit enables us to listen, to understand, to say what needs to be said.

Have you ever had the experience of trying to express yourself but being misunderstood?

You want to express concern but insensitivity is heard. You want to compliment but you insult. You want to encourage, but you communicate a put-down. What you say is misunderstood. You feel frustrated. You feel like a failure.

But every once in a while something happens between husbands and wives. Between parents and children. Between workers and employers. Between nations. The person your talking with says, "I think I understand. I get it! What you're saying is this. . . ." And you say, "Yes! That's it!"

It's a miracle. It really is! Communication takes place, healing takes place, reconciliation takes place, walls fall down. We believe those moments of hearing are the result, not of a large vocabulary, or skillful negotiating skills, or clever manipulation of emotions, but of the Holy Spirit.

Look at us this morning. We have our differences. Maybe husbands, wives, children, parents pretending to be happy but in reality sad, angry, frustrated. No one listens! No one understands!

Yet, by the great grace of God, we're all here together. And from time to time a miracle happens. We hear in our own language about God's deeds of power. And one of the greatest of God's deeds of power is the Holy Spirit's ability to enable us to listen and understand what God has done and what we need to do.

Dr. Sam Moffett, a lifelong missionary in Korea, tells the story of a theologian who visited Korea. He was taken to an isolated Korean village. The Korean Christians prevailed upon him to preach. He didn't know Korean and they didn't know English. A bi-lingual Korean Christian volunteered to translate. The American professor began in English, "All reality is either subjective or objective." The Korean translator paused for a moment. "How do I translate that?" Then the Holy Spirit enable him. He began to translate, "My Christian brothers and sisters, I've come all the way from the United States because I've heard of your love for the Lord Jesus Christ." The professor went on preaching in English his abstract intellectual sermon. And the Korean translator kept on preaching as the Spirit gave him utterance and the people heard in their own language about God's deeds of power.

Friends, I hope that whatever I say that the Holy Spirit will enable you to hear about God's wonderful deeds and that you will call upon the name of the Lord. I pray that the faithful find salvation, and the careless be awakened.

The doubting find faith, and the anxious be encouraged.

The tempted find help, and the sorrowful comforted.

The weary will find rest, and the strong be renewed.

The aged find consolation and the young be inspired . . .

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray: God our creator, earth has many languages,  
but your gospel proclaims your love  
to all nations in one heavenly tongue.  
Make us messengers of the good news  
that, through the power of your Spirit,  
all the world may unite in one song of praise;  
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.