Sermon for The Feast of Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, May 20, 2018
Text: Acts 2:1:21
Title: One hundred languages

We have language and customs for celebrating the two great feasts of the Church – “Merry Christmas!” we gush … “Happy Easter!” we cry – to say nothing of the trees and the trimmings, the baskets and colorful eggs. But Pentecost, the third major feast of the Church – the birthday of the Church – gets no such glory, maybe because the Holy Spirit just seems so slippery, so elusive, so much harder to get a hold of than the flesh and bones of a tender newborn baby, or of a friend lost and, against all odds, returned to us. And yet Jesus spends a lot of his ministry talking about the coming spirit, the promised spirit, the spirit of truth, particularly following his resurrection. He knows that he walks with his friends for only a short time – about three years – but that the Spirit will be with us forever: our inspiration, our guide, our advocate, God’s own self moving in and through us to further God’s work of love and mercy, to change the world, and to accomplish the promised end of perfect reconciliation.

Which sounds just lovely, right? But … how? How does this happen? How do we know when it is the spirit guiding us and not our egos, our ambition, our pride? When our impatience with the world or ourselves is a holy ache and not a destructive one? When the energy bubbling up within is from God and not just the thai curry we had last night? This is, basically, the mission of the Church: to provide people – not just Christians, not just members, but humanity – with knowledge and tools to help us discern God’s movements in our midst, so we can recognize what is happening and respond in ways that are life-giving for us and our communities.

The early Church theologians compared this all-encompassing mission to learning to read: we are to learn, then grow in, and then teach others how to read first creation – recognizing where and how God meets us in nature, in our bodies, in our relationships – and then the Bible, which Christians for a long time considered the second “book” of scripture, the first being the “book” of nature.

I think about this a lot living in what just might be the epicenter of our Spiritual-But-Not-Religious times here in the Bay Area. The Church is always forgetting and rediscovering important things about God and our history, and sometimes it seems to me like we forgot about
that first step, that first book. We took the earth for granted, followed the enlightenment’s lead a little too literally, cut our heads off from our hearts, pretending the God who loved us so much as to take on a body couldn’t care less about our bodies, actually teaching the terrible idea that salvation is about our minds and souls but not our flesh and bones, even when we have the story of a resurrected revolutionary at the heart of who we are, and at some point we stopped teaching people the first part of how to know God. Here. Now. In sunshine and starlight. In winds and waters. In deep breaths and belly laughs. In the rhythms of the earth and the seasons of our lives. In the joy of a hand held and a hug offered. Good cries. Passionate embraces. The joy and humility of receiving sustenance from the earth, tasting a fresh picked strawberry, delighting in a colorful flower. Stretching well-used muscles. Resting tired, satisfied bodies. These are ways we read the book of nature and find God – God – hiding there in plain sight.

But how often did you hear sermons about these holy disciplines growing up? How many times has the Church help you see the sacred in your yoga practice, your love for the mountains, your passion for gardening? Thanks be to God that it does happen – it can happen – but by and large we forgot this foundational step, and then we expected people to still, nevertheless, experience an enlivening, inspiring connection to the divine through academic theology, proofs of God’s existence, rote prayers, perfunctory practice, dogma and doctrine. And surely it works for some, because we humans are such a wonderfully diverse bunch. But in general this is a little like expecting someone to appreciate Dostoyevski when you never did the good hard work of reading *Hop on Pop* with them, painstakingly sounding out the vowels and consonants, patiently noticing letters, eventually discovering together language like “verb” and “noun” and “adjective” to help organize this process.

Sometimes I get so eager to share stories I love with my three-year-old daughter that are just beyond her comprehension that I try to read them to her anyway, and she tolerates it for a little while but then she gets kind of bored. She just literally cannot understand, so she loses her interest and turns away. The tragedy of life is not that we are so alone or so unloved or so bereft, though sometimes we feel this way, and it is definitely not that God has abandoned us or that there is no God in the first place. It is, instead, that God can be constantly, eternally, reaching out to us, calling us by name, trying to get our attention, to know us, to love, to heal us, and we can actually miss it. We can fail to understand. We might not know how to read the writing on the wall. Which is part of why Pentecost is such a game changer.
There they are, the twelve disciples, hiding inside, waiting as Jesus had instructed them, when “tongues, as of fire,” descend upon each of them and they are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in different languages. It is such an unexpected and chaotic scene! The mother tongue of “every nation under heaven” proclaimed in this house, each talking over the other. And a crowd gathers, “amazed and astonished,” wondering, “how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” How is it that we, English-speakers and Spanish-speakers; Christians, Jews, and Muslims; immigrants and citizens; monotheists and polytheists; native born and undocumented; artists and engineers; introverts and extroverts; hippies and hardliners; how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own language? How is it, but that the Holy Spirit helps us to understand each other? Even to understand languages we’ve never learned? Languages we have no reason, no right, to know? Even the languages of God?

And not only that – not only does the Spirit make understanding possible where it defies explanation – where it seems utterly impossible – where we seem so stuck that we cease to expect or even hope for movement - the Spirit is also poured out “on all flesh,” indiscriminately, open to all and everyone all the time. We might separate ourselves out by affinity groups and common interests, by race or religion, by political party or the size of our bank accounts, and then waste our days doggedly defending the lines that divide, but God simply will not be contained by our smallness of mind. God’s dream for us is too big, too bold, too great, and our world is too desperate for change to waste time with such petty things. It is the birthday of the Church, and this shocking impulse toward ever-wider circles of inclusion will be the great work of the Holy Spirit throughout the rest of the book of Acts, as the disciples slowly come to realize their message is not only for the children of Israel but for all the children of God: white, black, brown, male, female, eunuch, slave, free, Jew, Greek, undocumented, refugee ... no matter. These are our ways of organizing identity, and they are all smaller than the only identity marker that matters to the Holy Spirit: that we are each created in the image of God.

I recently heard John A. Powell, director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society Studies at U.C. Berkeley, tell a searing story that illustrates how the Spirit still moves in our lives, though he doesn’t use quite that language. Powell earned his B.A. from Stanford in the late 60s. While an undergraduate, he co-founded the Black Student Union and, in one of their

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early meetings, he recalls the group agreeing that “there were definitely some good white people, but not that many, and it took a lot of energy to find them.” As a result of this conversation, the members agreed to simply stop interacting with their fellow white students, whom they felt had made so little effort to know or show any concern for them. Powell left the meeting agitated. He hadn’t agreed with the decision but, as one of the leaders of the group, he felt obliged to honor their collective wisdom.

He recalls walking onto the main quad around noon and that it was eerily quiet. And then he saw someone – a white woman, also a student – walking towards him, and he thought about how he would have to consciously avoid her. They kept walking, and eventually he noticed that she was blind and using a cane, and as she advanced she stumbled into a row of bicycles. Powell thought to himself, “Oh, that’s too bad,” but kept walking. Realizing what had happened, the girl started to panic, and turned even further into the maze of wheels and frames, and Powell felt terrible but thought, “not my problem.” And then he paused, and something shifted in him, and he just couldn’t ignore her any longer. Couldn’t walk by. Couldn’t deny her humanity. So he went to help her, and then he went to the next meeting of the Black Student Union and told everyone he couldn’t live by their agreement.

Remember that Jews in the ancient world very rarely shared anything with those polytheistic Greeks or those emperor-worshiping Romans. Remember that they were routinely oppressed and persecuted. That the people in the dominant culture around them did not recognize their humanity; did not understand the language of monotheism, sacrifice, circumcision, kosher or Sabbath. And yet, Jesus taught them to reach out in love to the very people who hated them, and then the Holy Spirit gave them the tongues of every nation, and soon the disciples will be out rubbing shoulders with enemies and untouchables, because, somehow, they are able to see, to know, to understand, what is beyond them. This is the Holy Spirit at work, pushing us beyond ourselves in love and hope. It would be no less shocking than if Palestinians and Israelis today suddenly recognized one another as brothers and sisters, or the most ardently anti-immigration advocates were able to at least affirm the dignity – the humanity - of the people they demonized.

So the spirit surprises us, disturbs us, assists us, but it is still always easier to know how God would have us live when we are already in touch with the life of God within. One of the things I particularly love about our parish school, Ventana, is its appreciation for a poem by
Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio Emilia's educational philosophy, called “The Hundred Languages of Children.” Here’s how it begins:

“No way
The hundred is there.
The child is made of one hundred.
The child has a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
a hundred, always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds to discover
a hundred worlds to invent
a hundred worlds to dream.”

If we want to be the kind of people who see clearly, people of courage and conviction, people who love boldly and risk everything to care for others, well, we’re in luck. Because this happens to be precisely what the Spirit is all about, and we will have help. But if you’re not sure where to start, maybe start at the beginning, with first things, with foundations: rediscovering your mother tongue, exploring the languages that have always been a part of you, curious about that big dream within and beyond. Surely God, who spoke creation into being, the author of our salvation; God the word made flesh, and God the source of our understanding, will be with us in our searching and finding. Amen.