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| A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard | Prepared for the congregation of  Saint Andrew’s, State College, PA |
| To be delivered on May 31, 2020 | On the occasion of Pentecost |

Acts 2

The Universal Language

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

On Pentecost, God poured out the Holy Spirit and the apostles began the work of proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ. In Jerusalem there were people from all over the world, people separated by the barrier of different languages. The Spirit broke through that barrier and enabled the apostles to speak in a way that each person could understand. This event, the reversal of the curse from the Tower of Babel story in the Hebrew Scriptures, marked the birth of the Church and the beginning of bold mission activity in the Name of Jesus.

Ever since that day, the Good News has spread around the world. The Bible has been translated into countless different languages. People preach and pray in whatever language they are most comfortable with. More than just different languages, each new age has required the Church to develop a new way of translating the Gospel for the times. For much of its history, the Church has been a major driver of the culture in which it was found. However, we seem to be in different times, a new age for the Church, one when the culture is more and more able to ignore the message we proclaim. We find ourselves on the outside of many conversations these days, sidelined by a loss of respect for the Church and worse a waning sense of relevancy for what we stand for and what we have to say.

It’s not a language problem, per se, but we definitely need to experience a new Pentecost moment. We need to find a new way to connect with the society in which we live. We need to develop new ways of proclaiming Jesus Christ to people who have either never really heard the Gospel but may have distorted concept of what it is, or who have been mistreated and wounded by a church in their past. One thing that is on our side, we live in a culture that doesn’t realize how much it is influenced by the Christian story. From Harry Potter to Star Wars, popular culture is still rife with Christian themes and images. Because of pervasive Biblical illiteracy, folks often fail to appreciate the source or significance of those themes. We have an opportunity to act as interpreters of this culture and to make connections for people with a story that may seem more familiar than they expect. Besides, basic human nature hasn’t changed. People still have the same concerns and questions they’ve always had. They just don’t necessarily look to the Church for comfort or answers. We need to figure out how to be a source of comfort for those who are seeking comfort elsewhere. The very culture in which we live, the remnant of Christendom, can be a way to reach out and be heard by those who are indifferent to or estranged from the Church.

Sometimes being understood means being able to distinguish ourselves from other Christian voices that tend to have a different approach to Scripture or theology. It’s been amazing to me to watch the different reactions by those in the religious community, and especially fellow Christians, to the COVID-19 pandemic. This presents us with an opportunity to speak clearly on subjects that people are ready to hear about. We can say that we see no conflict between modern science and the revealed Word of God. Nature is a form of revelation itself and science is the pursuit of truth by discovery and experimentation within God’s good creation. Truth is a universal language. We need not fear it or seek to corrupt it. A science driven approach to dealing with this pandemic is not counter to faith. It is absolutely faithful to a loving God who does not wish to see us suffer needlessly.

We can speak with a clear moral voice in the midst of this pandemic too. We can say that loving your neighbor demands that you wear a mask in public. Period. We can say that complex problems, like pandemics or climate change, require complex solutions. And complex solutions require cooperation, which usually means some level of sacrifice of our individual rights. Sacrificial love, after all, is a Christian theme and value.

As we develop our ability to be understood on matters such as science and religion, and social morality, we must preserve our ability to think and speak theologically. God is the subject of our proclamation. We must be able to speak about God-with-us in the midst of suffering and chaos. We must be able to talk about a loving God, not a God who punishes with plague and pestilence. We must be able to address the deep questions people have with the truths of the Christian faith, but to do so in fresh ways that engage the imagination.

As we seek new ways to share old truths, we need to develop the ability to speak about sin, not just to moralize or pronounce judgment, but to speak the truth in a way that invites in rather than casts out. For instance, how do we talk about the sin of racism? What does the Church have to say about the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of police this past week? Can we confront the moment—the injustice, the rage, the outcry—and still confront the bigger picture—the unjust structures of society, the long history of violence against black men, the subtle, subconscious, soul-crushing effects of racism? How do we talk about sin at a time like this? How do we make the argument that sin is not just an individual thing; it has a communal expression as well and we all participate in that? How do we confront the sin of racism on all its levels while simultaneously being about Good News, about redemption, reconciliation, hope, forgiveness, mercy, and grace? We need to find a way to talk about sin if we want to be heard.

Speaking with a clear voice in these days of division and heated rhetoric is a challenge to be sure. As we seek to be heard and understood, our language becomes an issue, just as surely as it was at the Tower of Babel. Hot button words and dog whistle phrases don’t continue a conversation. They end them. Speaking the truth from the Christian perspective means seeking, as St. Paul did, to be all things to all people. I’m not talking about being politically correct or so circumspect you say nothing. But language is important. It can divide or unite. We must be sure that we are speaking the truth in love, always. Speaking the truth also means being willing to hear the truth of another. Sometimes what divides us is less about disagreement and more about different priorities of concern

On Pentecost God poured out the Holy Spirit and the apostles began to speak in other languages to be understood by all the different people in Jerusalem. This Pentecost, let us pray for that same Spirit to be poured out on God’s Church again so we can proclaim the Good News in ways that will be heard and understood today. If it seems intimidating, well, then you’ve been paying attention. But remember that it was not the skill of the apostles but the Spirit of God that gave them the ability to be understood. That same loving God who became flesh in Jesus is with us even now as his Spirit moves through the world. As the Church, it is up to us to follow that Spirit where it leads us. Faith and humility will help us find the words to proclaim the Word in our generation so the next generation of faithful Christians can carry on the work that the Spirit has given us to do.

Happy Pentecost!

Amen.