

“Speaking and Understanding Our Different Languages”

Sunday, May 23, 2010—Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

Rev. Judy Landt, Vernon Presbyterian Church

In order to become a Presbyterian minister, you have to be able to show a working knowledge of Biblical Hebrew and Greek. For many of us in seminary, the language courses were among the most difficult, probably because as research tells us, our ability to learn new languages peaks at about the age of twelve and goes downhill rapidly from there. Having studied Hebrew as a child, I did find I had a certain advantage. Some vocabulary was stored in my memory, and I was able to retrieve it. More mysterious, however, was the discovery that, the grammar of the language had somehow imprinted itself in my brain, giving me an intuitive understanding of what was correct, although without any conscious grasp of the underlying rules. The chickens eventually came home to roost when I was asked to help teach others and had to confess that I really couldn't do that, because I lacked any ability to explain what I somehow mysteriously knew. When I confessed the truth, I also found many others just didn't believe it.

All of this reminds me a little of the mysterious, inexplicable events of that first Pentecost. Pentecost, by the way, was originally a Jewish holiday, an agricultural festival known as the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot. It was celebrated fifty days after Passover—hence the prefix “Pente”, meaning five. Jews from all over the Roman Empire came to Jerusalem to observe it. They brought their offerings to the temple, and they came to remember and celebrate God's great gift to them, the gift of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

On this first Christian Pentecost, however, Jesus' disciples are not celebrating. Jesus has died, and as far as his followers are concerned, all his promises of a different kind of life have died with him. They have locked themselves up in a dark room, a sad, dispirited and fearful bunch. They figure they will commiserate with each other for a while, before they go back to doing whatever it was they did before they met our Lord.

Suddenly a violent wind tears through the place, shaking everything to the rafters. Flames appear and rest on Jesus' followers. They rush out on to the streets of Jerusalem, where thousands are gathering for the observance of Shavuot. The people come from all sorts of exotic places with hard to pronounce names, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. Everyone begins praising God in their different languages, and yet everyone understands what is being said in their own language. These events cannot be rationally explained. Some sneer and chalk it all up to excessive alcohol consumption too early in the day. Luke explains that the Spirit of God had come upon them all. Peter goes out and preaches a great sermon that leads thousands of new believers to be baptized. People cannot stop talking about God and what God is doing. This is the story of how the church began, and so we refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the church. It began with the gift of the Holy Spirit, transforming a group of frightened individuals into a bold community with the energy to live in an entirely new way.

For me, one of the most startling insights of this story is that God acted at Pentecost to bring people together and build understanding between them despite their differences. The Holy Spirit acted to break down barriers between people, with the followers of Jesus leading the way.

Back in the 1990's, the late historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned about what he called the Balkanization of American society. An increasingly diverse population must share space that continues to shrink. "Unless a common purpose binds people together," he cautioned, "tribal hostilities will drive us apart." Today we see this happening, and not just in politics. The conflicts that erupt and smolder among us increasingly have religious dimensions. Recently the town board of Wilson in Sheboygan County voted to approve a conditional use permit allowing the first mosque to open in the county. The angry debate that preceded this decision made clear that many local residents opposed the mosque because they equated Islam with terrorism. Last month there was a violent clash between Jewish and Muslim students at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Reportedly, a swastika was drawn in chalk on the sidewalk where Jewish students were celebrating the founding of Israel. A Jewish student attempted to throw a Palestinian flag in the trash. Tensions escalated into violence between the two groups. (Journal Sentinel, p.3B, May 19, 2010.) In a global community, our safety, indeed our survival, depends upon our ability to reach across barriers and build bridges with those who are different. Clearly, when it comes to breaking down barriers between those who speak different languages, the Holy Spirit has her work cut out for her.

Recently I read the book "Three Cups of Tea" by Greg Mortenson, which is surely one of the most powerful accounts of the breaking down of barriers between people I have ever read. Mortenson was a mountain climber whose passion was the high mountains in the Himalaya. In 1993, he attempted an ascent of K2, in Pakistan's Karakoram region. His summit attempt failed. When he stumbled into the desperately poor village of Korphe after 78 days on the mountain, he was close to death. The people of the village saved his life and nursed him back to health. Then he discovered the abysmal state of education in this village. When he went to see the local school, he found 84 children sitting in dirt, writing with sticks, and sharing seven slate boards. He decided that he would return to Korphe to build a school for the people. His book is the story of how, against tremendous odds, and at great personal cost and risk, he not only kept his promise to build a school in Korphe, but expanded to build dozens more across Pakistan and Afghanistan, eventually serving thousands of children. Mortenson has managed, in the course of his work, to gain the trust of a wide range of people, from Islamic leaders to military commanders, from government officials to tribal chiefs. This happened through a long term process of relationship building grounded in cross-cultural respect. He says: "We Americans think you have to accomplish everything quickly. We're the country of thirty minute power lunches and two minute football drills...(the people of rural Pakistan) taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down and make building relationships as important as building programs. (I learned) that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them" (p.150).

While Mortenson's primary goal has always been to serve children, not to fight terrorism, he makes clear that there is connection. "Terror doesn't happen," he writes, "because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren't being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death" (p. 292). He is convinced that when it comes to terrorism, the real enemy is ignorance, and the only way to defeat it is through education. Education provides alternatives to the illiterate, impoverished areas that are the recruiting grounds for terror.

Mortenson's particular passion is education for girls, who are often denied education in conservative Islamic societies. He cites research that shows that educating girls benefits not only the girls themselves, but has a significant impact on the entire society in which they live. It leads to lower birth rates and lower infant mortality. And because educated women are likely to remain in their communities, they are in a position to positively influence the values of those around them. Illiteracy isolates communities; education helps connect them with the outside world.

Mortenson is convinced that the war on terror will never be won unless we provide educational alternatives for the young children who are now being indoctrinated into extremist ideology at an early age. Summarizing what he hopes people take from his book, he says: "Ultimately to achieve global peace and defeat terror we must do it with education and books, not edicts and bombs...I think the greatest poverty we face in our country is a poverty of compassion and that we live more in fear than in hope. If you fight terrorism, it is based in fear, but if you promote peace, it is based in hope. Ignorance is the real enemy, whether it is in Afghanistan, Africa, or America, and it is ignorance that breeds hatred."

Mortenson's message is not anti-military. He is himself a proud military veteran. And many of his supporters are military veterans who have spent time in Afghanistan and are convinced that without education, nothing will change there.

What has all this to do with Pentecost? Well, remember, we are a community empowered by the Holy Spirit to break down barriers and to reach across differences to bring people together. We are a community empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread understanding among those who speak different languages. And it seems to me that Greg Mortenson and the Central Asia Institute, the not for profit organization that continues his work in Pakistan and Afghanistan today, have a powerful message for the church to proclaim. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can proclaim it.

A lot of people feel uneasy about the way we in this country do charity. We contribute money to many worthy causes that help meet the needs of the poor and disadvantaged. It's a good thing to keep our food pantries stocked and to send water and hygiene kits to the sites of natural disasters. But the uneasiness stems from the fact that these efforts do nothing to address the root causes of poverty or change the systems that perpetuate it. Greg Mortenson offers a different vision, a vision of education as a way to bring about profound and lasting change in a society. And, by the way, it costs about \$1 a month to get a rural child educated in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

I hope you'll read Mortenson's book. It's a book that deserves to be read and talked about in the church. I think his vision is powerful and important.

Christ calls us to spread the good news about a God who is loving and inclusive, and a faith that inspires us to reach out in love to the world, across all the barriers that divide us. The Spirit empowers us to build bridges and dismantle walls that keep people separated, imprisoned by ignorance, fear, and hate. It happened on that first Pentecost; it can still happen today. We can learn new languages of hope and trust; we can retrieve the ancient love languages God has planted within us. We can do all sorts of amazing things because we are the church and the Spirit is here, a Spirit that roars like wind and burns like fire and explodes with energy that has no end.

Thanks be to God. Amen.