

Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021, Acts 2:1-21

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.”

Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church; rushing wind, tongues of fire, and the miracle of language; people speaking, hearing, and understanding one another even though they had never learned or spoken to one another in foreign languages before. Wouldn't it be great if we could all understand each other, no matter what language we speak, be it English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Christian, Jew, Muslim, democrat, republican or independent, black or white, young or old, city or country, gay, straight, nonbinary, or any combination thereof?

When it comes to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we sometimes get so caught up in our own ways of thinking, speaking, and hearing that we send and receive the wrong message, even though we are technically speaking the same language. I say “technically” because just because we are all speaking English doesn't necessarily mean we are speaking the same language as far as intention and understanding are concerned.

Nationality, age, gender, environment, and many other factors influence the words we speak and the signals we receive. That's one of the big issues we dealt with while wearing masks; without being able to see facial expressions, it was often difficult to understand a person's intention. Were they being serious, sarcastic, funny, critical, or what? Now that the masks are off for many of us, we will, hopefully, have fewer instances of miscommunication.

On the one hand, with or without masks, the church is often one of the most frequent places where we experience miscommunication. That seems rather ironic since one of the great miracles of the origins of the church was the speaking and understanding of so many different languages. But human nature being what it is, as the church grew, so did our determination that one way was the right way and if anyone didn't understand that way, they were wrong, and left as outsiders.

On the other hand, though, the church, and I might say especially the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is making strides to overcome the barriers that separate some of our siblings from a better experience, understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. A couple examples of those efforts can be experienced at our very own monthly worship service, “The Table” introduced as “the imperfect church for imperfect people.”

Two things that I especially appreciate about The Table are the Welcome Statement and the and Apology of the Church that we include in every service.

The welcome statement sincerely says,

Welcome to the Table...an imperfect church for imperfect people. It doesn't matter if you are brown, tan, black or white, you belong! Whether you are gay, straight, or torn, or even where you were born, you belong! It doesn't matter how much you make, or how much you fake, you belong! Whether you have a PhD, or a GED, if you went to Yale, or just came from jail, you belong! We worship a God who loves us, all the same! You belong!

And as no small matter, that statement is punctuated with an exclamation point, a sign of astonishment. And to better understand why some might feel astonished at such a statement, all we need to do is look at the “apology on behalf of the church” that, like the welcome statement, as it is expressed here at The Table, as well as in other congregations throughout our synod. That apology confesses:

[N]ow, before we move toward recognition of our [individual] faults, I want to offer an apology on behalf of the church. For the ways the church may have ignored you, judged you, and rejected you; for any pain, hurt, division, or betrayal the church may have caused. I am sorry. Nothing can undo the wrong you have endured; Jesus knows that same pain, and we pray for you deep inner healing and peace in His name.

That apology is followed by a time of silence in which we long-time leaders and members can reflect of how we might have been a part of those hurtful ways and for those who have been hurt to begin healing from past wounds and start living in the light of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are many things I don’t understand about people who are different from me. Why do they think that way? Where did they get those ideas? What do they actually believe? When did they realize what they now see as the truth? Who has influenced them positively or negatively to bring them to where they are today?

But not understanding is different from not accepting, not appreciating, and especially different from not loving. Jesus reiterated the second greatest commandment from the Old Testament, “Love you neighbor as yourself”, unconditionally.

When we are open to the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can experience some pretty amazing and astonishing things. We can learn to understand the language of people who are different from us in many ways. We can learn to speak in languages that others understand whether they are from other countries, other generations, or any other “other” we may encounter.

Pentecost Sunday is a perfect time to begin truly listening to what others are saying, not just hearing. This is the time to begin speaking sincerely from the heart, the source of universal language. And most of all, let us begin right now to share the most important message of Pentecost and the church throughout the ages, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved!” Amen.