**“Speaking God’s Love in another Language”**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman**

**Pentecost, 2016**

Our cacophanous reading of today’s Acts passage is among my most favorite liturgical events of the year. Diversity, as we all know, poses challenges each of us, day in and day out. This is has been true since the ancient of days, as we heard in our Genesis reading. There, it was experienced as so difficult as to be a punishment inflicted by God. And yet just a few moments ago, we heard not of how it frustrated the purposes of God’s people, but rather how it drew them together in awe and wonder. The Spirit of God did not descend to erase the diversity in order to spread the Good News—the love—of God, but instead, to embrace it.

The first chapter of Acts, which we haven’t heard in the context of our worship, tells us that after spending time with the disciples off and on across 40 days, the Risen Christ orders them to go back to the upper room. Don’t leave, he instructs, until the Holy Spirit—the Advocate as John’s Gospel calls it--has come upon you. Back in the upper room, I bet the disciples were sad, and I bet they were afraid. They have had to say good-bye to Jesus yet again, and they are now back in this room where they retreated to in such fear the last time he left them, hung upon the cross.

I wonder, as they huddled in prayer in that upper room, what they expected this Advocate to be like?

If it were me, sad and afraid, I would imagine a Holy Comforter—A God-given human person-perhaps a wise looking older soul -- to gently guide me back into the world, and my new role in it.

But, oh how wrong I would have been! Rather than the wise, gentle soul *I* would have been expecting, what *they* got were tongues of fire, and a sort of out-of-body experience of being taken over and given the ability to speak in other languages.

You know, I have always identified with the throngs of city-goers on that Pentecost Day, hearing God’s word in my own language. We all hear God differently, and it has been so comforting to me to know that the Word will come to me in just the way I need it to, in order to truly hear it.

But this week, I am realizing that as a follower of Christ, I am also called to identify with the disciples. For those of us who are disciples of Christ, the emphasis in the Pentecost moment is not primarily on our hearing of God’s word in our own language, but instead on our speaking it in another’s language! The word “Advocate” that John uses to describe the Spirit takes on a radically new meaning for me from this perspective. Perhaps it is not an advocate for me, as I have long understood it, but instead, an advocate for those whose language I have never had the time, nor perhaps the inclination, to learn.

Tongues of fire was apparently a common Jewish metaphor of the time for the discomfort of Phrophesying—one scholar described it as a feeling of inflammation and agitation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This “Advocate’s” first act was not to warmly gather the disciples in towards each other for comfort and renewal, but to inflame and agitate them outwards into the language of those who were different from them.

Speaking a language fluently opens one up to the culture and perspective of its speakers. For example, it means learning what concepts this new language has no words for, and which it has multiple words for—or how one in this new culture speaks to those in authority, and just who is considered a person of authority.

*Competency* in another language can be achieved by thinking in our first language and translating quickly into the new language. But, *fluency* is achieved only by thinking in this second language—inhabiting it to the extent that we are no longer translating from our original perspective, but truly experiencing the new one.

This Spirit—inflamed and agitating their eyes, ears, hands, and tongues so that they might be turned outward—inhabiting the perspective of the “other”— is what Jesus ordered his disciples, and therefore, us, to wait for before embarking on ministry in his name.

It says a little something about what the work of Jesus is, doesn’t it?

PAUSE

So, how might the Spirit might be hovering over us with tongues of fire this very Pentecost Day, in 2016?

Over the past many years, many of us have become more and more distraught at the persistence of racism in our country. For me, the Spirit has been hovering—inflaming my soul and agitating me outward, pleading with me to somehow directly engage the pain and injury of these of God’s beloved.

With the Advocate’s agitation, I have come to know that I am being called by Christ to inhabit the experience of my brothers and sisters of color to the extent that I can begin to understand the Love of God as *they* understand it, and become more fluent in proclaiming it as *they* proclaim it. This understanding and proclamation in the language of those we seek to support is at the center of our joining them in their fight for justice.

Despite my agitation, though, I have not known where to start. I have felt so overwhelmed by my fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, that I have become paralyzed.

I wonder if this might be an experience shared by any of you?

Many in the black community have suggested that the first step we might take as White people is not to partner with black congregations and learn about them, but to first learn more about ourselves—specifically, our whiteness and how that whiteness has participated in making us each who we are today.

Chris and I have begun to do this, and would like to invite those of you whom the Spirit has agitated to join us. As such, we have chosen as our Parish summer reading the book *Waking up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, by Debby Irving. Debby is a white woman who grew up in Winchester, and writes of how her own “long-held beliefs about colorblindness, being a good person, and wanting to help people of color”[[2]](#footnote-2) needed to be examined and, often, questioned in order for her to begin to engage in effective antiracism work. Her experiences have been mine on many levels, and I have found the book a warm, rather than shaming, invitation to begin to learn this new language.

Our hope is that those of you whom the Spirit has agitated, or will agitate over the next few months, will prayerfully consider how you might gently push aside the paralysis of fear and engage with your companions here in a loving exploration of Whiteness. In my limited experience thus far, it is a process in which God’s grace, and new life, are radically abundant.

PAUSE

May the Advocate visit each of us in some way or another this Pentecost Season, and agitate us to understand and proclaim the love of God in a way we never before dreamed was possible! AMEN.

1. *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* on the Gospel of John. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From the publisher’s description of *Waking up White*, by Debby Irving. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)