

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” That’s a very famous phrase. I googled it to find out where it comes from and discovered something more interesting. Nobody believes it. There were links to countless articles all talking about the tremendous power of words to destroy hearts and minds and reputations. And, many of them mentioned the power that words have to comfort and to heal. But in the end, there was unanimous agreement. Words matter. Language is of critical importance. There is something very profound about the process of our minds forming thoughts and expressing those thoughts in words.

At the same time, communication is not easy. There are communication breakdowns between genders, different races, social classes. It even goes wrong between people who know each other very well. What hope is there for us to understand one another?

Remember the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel? It is fascinating to consider that there was a time when there was an original, unified language of humanity. But, because those first people ignored God’s plan to go ‘fill the earth’ and came up with a plan of their own, we are told that God confused and divided their language, and because they were unable to communicate, they were scattered over the earth. I bring this up (it’s really the appointed readings for this day that bring this up) because you are invited to see the Pentecost story as a gracious reversal of Babel.

Fast forward to the Day of Pentecost, captured in our second reading. This took place after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven. On the day of Pentecost, we are told, that “there were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious people who had come from every country in the world.” The book of Acts provides a lengthy list of places where those people came from. Among that group of people there were differences in race, class, status and language that together caused a communication headache.

On that Day of Pentecost, gathered for a thanksgiving celebration at the Jerusalem Temple, this diverse crowd heard what sounded like a rush of wind, and saw tongues of fire “which spread out and touched each person there.” They were filled with the Holy Spirit and given the gift of speech and of hearing. We are told, “They were all excited, because each of them heard the believers talking in his own language.”

Then Peter stood up to speak. He quotes the prophet Joel. “This is what I will do in the last days, God says: I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. You sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit and they will proclaim my message.”

He is announcing the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy; that this is now happening to older men and women; young people; students; young parents; middle-aged people; regular people of humble means; people on the margins, ones the world has little use for; the Spirit is pulling them all in. The Spirit of God descends upon all these and they speak and hear.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that such speaking and hearing happened back then? Do you believe it happens today? Is the Holy Spirit powerful enough to overcome the barriers and boundaries that frustrate our speaking and hearing?

The Church says “Yes!” The Holy Spirit overcomes the things that divide us and opens our ears, hearts, and minds to the wonderful and winsome words of God.

Look at us this morning. All of the factors which divide any gathering of human beings are true of us. We come from all kinds of backgrounds, born in widely different places. Some grew up in loving and close families, others whose childhood memories only bring hurt and pain. We come with all kinds of life-experiences. Some are happy, others not so much. Some are healthy, others are suffering. Some are young, others are seasoned. Some are frustrated and angry, others have experienced joy and happiness in their families or at work. If we analyzed ourselves this way we could fill a book with the amount of diversity among us.

Yet, by God’s design, we are here together, with open hearts. One of the reasons why people keep coming back to church is that they hear something in this place they do not hear elsewhere. You don’t get this anywhere else. Like the crowd that first Pentecost Day, we come here with all of our differences, and yet we are still able to hear what God is saying to us. The Spirit of God is descending as we gather and hear his Word.

And what is this unique Word? It is the announcement that Someone has come to make things right. More specifically, it is the verbal description of the life and actions of Jesus Christ, God’s own Son. But it is not a description given in an academic way or a theoretical way or an abstract way. May it never be those things. No, this unique message is the announcement that Jesus was God walking around in the world—that he died sacrificially to save you—that he came back to life so that you will too—and that he ascended into heaven to reign as King and to send His Spirit to accompany every word that is ever spoken about Him. Doesn’t that grab your heart? And this message is called “the gospel.” It is the telling of news that changes your entire life.

Today people run in races called marathons. The whole idea comes from a historical battle in Greece. The Greeks were hopelessly outnumbered, yet still managed to defeat the Persian forces, and a soldier named Phidippides was commissioned to run from the battle of Marathon to Sparta, about 26 miles, to announce what had happened. Phidippides had good news of actual events. The victory at Marathon did not end the war, but it turned the tide and gave the Greeks great confidence to defend their culture.

Why did I tell you that story? Because the news about Jesus works in a similar way. What got the people so excited on Pentecost and what sets hearts on fire today is news. It’s a gospel announcement. It is not “here’s what you have to do.” It is “you have been rescued.” Jesus won not only the battle, but the war. Your enemy is defeated. “It is finished.”

The Holy Spirit is sent to make that proclamation as clear as possible. The Spirit is sent to convict us and hold us accountable. The Spirit and Word tell us that you and I could never do enough or live well enough to gain God’s favor. And the same Spirit and Word tell us: you don’t have to. The gospel is not: you have to save yourself from slavery to sin. You have to break out of prison. You have to work your way back into God’s good graces. That is not the gospel at all. The Holy Spirit unwraps it again today: the gospel is that Jesus checked off every box for you; He exchanged places with you, so that he gets your cross and you get his crown. He’s done it, and it’s yours. Do you taste the sweetness of that? Does that bring a lightness to your soul? If so, that’s a sign that Spirit is communicating to you His greatest gift: saving faith in Jesus Christ.

