

Acts 2:1-21
Genesis 11:1-9
June 5, 2022

The Better Ear

I once visited a couple, of the World War 2 generation, and sat in their living room while they complained about not being able to hear each other very well. Now it turned out that each of them had one good ear and one bad ear, hers was the left and his was the right. Picture this in your mind, if she sat on the right and he on the left, their good ears would be side by side, and there would be a heightened possibility of successful communication.

Their actual habit was the opposite, he sat on the right and she on the left, which lowered that probability, and they spent a considerable amount of energy not hearing one another and complaining about it. I shouldn't have, but I asked them why they didn't switch places. They did not answer, just smiled and glared at me as if I had crossed a line into a private place I did not belong.

Communication has always been somewhat difficult between people. The issue is not always a failure to hear or to adequately articulate meaning. "That is what I thought you said," is a familiar refrain as people are confronted by the reality that it isn't so much that they can't hear or understand one another, but that they understand very well and don't like what they are hearing.

I have always marveled that sometimes I meet people with whom there is an instant rapport, and exchanging information is easy, as if we had not just met, but had a long acquaintance. In other cases no matter how much time I have spent, the other seems very much like an alien. No level of familiarity overcomes the breach. It is as if we never met.

Consider the problem when it comes to divine things. Given the trouble people have understanding each other, how much more difficult might it be to hear and speak to God. The problem is only exacerbated when people are speaking to one another about the things of God. It is as if we are caught on the wrong side of our better ears.

There have been two texts read for us on this Pentecost Sunday, and speaking and hearing play a prominent role in both. The first comes from the Book of Genesis and relates the confusion that happened in the story of Babel as human beings were scattered in their speech and geographically over the earth.

The implication of the story is that the confusion occurred by divine mandate over concerns that the people were communicating *too* well, if you can imagine that, and in their arrogance lunging towards overreach in the effort to attain the divine.

My pentecostal friends, who take their name from the event described in the 2nd chapter of Acts, which is the other text read for us today, tell me that the flaming tongues of fire that came at that Pentecost

festival are seen as the reverse of Babel, that at long last God had decided the time had come for people to understand one another again.

In other words, it is part of redemption that people were able to speak in other languages than their own and be understood by hearers from around the world who heard the message about Jesus in their native tongue. It occurs to me that the miracle was as much one of listening and hearing as of speech and expression, involving the better ear, the one that hears the Spirit.

It would appear that there *is* a similar dynamic in the world of contemporary history. In a this-world historical way, human beings were indeed scattered all over the globe, isolated from one another in terms not only of their geographical locations, but also their religious and cultural traditions, their particular political and economic relationships, and of course, their languages.

The world *is* learning to speak just a few languages that are becoming “lingua francas,” as it is sometimes called, common languages, making communication easier. The universal problem of communication can no longer be blamed so easily on the use of different languages, a confusion of tongues.

The world is getting smaller, one person wrote a book about the “flattening of the earth,” it is becoming more global. The prevalence of languages like English and a few others, which are becoming more pervasively

used, is removing the barriers that once language presented to people. Technology has removed the geographical barriers.

But this story, the one in the Book of Acts, *is not* about the affects of industrialization as a uniting catalyst, making life in one place increasingly similar to life in another. Rather, it is about the Holy Spirit which means it is about God. In spiritual terms, people appear evermore divided, there remains the usual litany of problems that human beings have never been able to solve; poverty and war, disease, inequities and injustices, racism, and all the rest. It has always appeared to some that we are headed for harder times. It is not a hard case to make.

The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, however, speaks a different message, refers to a different kind of coming together among people, one characterized by the transformation of relationships, by love and mercy, towards friendship and goodwill, involving a vision of peace and blessing for everyone.

The arrival of the Spirit means that God is in that vision. The cross of Jesus and his raising, which is the story that was told at that festival, is at the center of God’s activity, as is the arrival of the Holy Spirit. It is not as easily seen as the more historical process, and it is not inevitable, not the result of human planning or initiative.

Not everyone believes in it or even desires it, for to desire it requires a renewal of heart and mind, and that

is what the time of the Holy Spirit means, a switching of places of sorts, so that we can hear with the better ear, the one that desires fellowship and friendship and understanding across the divides.

It is the time of the Holy Spirit, which can not be seen with eyes or touched by hands. Let us seek today a clear conviction of its reality and power. Let us not live our lives believing only in the world of sense and time where history happens, but receive the grace to understand that the world we can not see or touch is the most real world of all.

Our lives will be lived in time, but they will involve eternal issues. The needs of our bodies will shout out, but it is for the needs of our souls that we must care. Our business will be with material things, but let us be aware of the spiritual things behind them. Let us always keep in mind that the things that matter are not money or possessions, not houses or property, not bodily comforts or pleasures, but truth and honor and gentleness and helpfulness, and the pure love of God.

I am not sure why my couple friends sat opposite their deafness, they seemed to prefer it that way. Perhaps they saw the depths of relationship implied as a threat to lessen them rather than a promise to make them whole. In these times of the Spirit, on this day of Pentecost, let us not prefer it that way. We pray the Lord will shape in us a desire to hear with the better ear and to speak from our better selves, towards the beauty of reconciled relations with God and all our neighbors. Amen

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