

St. Paul's, Concord
Pentecost, May 19 & 20, 2018
Acts 2:1-21
Rev. Kate Atkinson

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine told me that, on their fifth month anniversary, he was planning to tell his girlfriend that he loves her. But he wasn't just going to say "I love you." His girlfriend is from Portugal – and he was going to learn how to say "I love you" in Portuguese.

I saw my friend again last week and asked him how it had gone. "Oh, it was amazing!" he said. "We had a great dinner and we were sitting on the couch afterwards and I turned to her and said, 'eu te amo.' And she burst into tears." I don't know how to say "He's a keeper" in Portuguese, but I have a feeling that's exactly what that young woman is thinking!

There's something so comforting about hearing your own language spoken – especially when you're living in a foreign land. A few years ago we had a member of our Food Pantry team who spoke Bhutanese – and I'll never forget how the faces of our immigrant families would light up when she came out to help them choose their food. Not only could she explain to them the concept of things like peanut butter and Spaghetti-Os – she also made them feel welcome and valued. And she gave them back a voice that they'd started to lose when they arrived in this country because so many people couldn't understand what they were saying.

In the book of Acts, we hear that familiar story of Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian Church. But, as we see in the first line of our reading, Pentecost existed long before Christianity came on the scene. It's a Jewish festival, also known as Hag ha-Bikkurim, the Festival of the First Fruits, and it commemorates the first harvest from the land and its dedication in the Temple. Its other name is Shavu'ot, the Festival of Weeks, because it occurs exactly seven weeks (or 49 days) after another great Jewish festival, Passover. And it's called Pentecost (from the Greek Πεντηκοστή [Pentēkostē] meaning fiftieth) because it takes place on the 50th day.

But the Christian Church didn't steal Pentecost away from the Jews and make it our own holy day. The festival of Pentecost still exists in the Jewish tradition as the celebration of the harvest, and it now has another association – and another name – as well. It's known as Hag Matan Torateinu, and it's a celebration of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai (which is what the name means: "the Festival of the Giving of Our Torah").

But the significance of that particular day of Pentecost wasn't so much *what* was being celebrated but rather the simple fact that it was a major festival day. The 1st century Jewish historian, Josephus, describes how the population of Jerusalem (normally around 150,000) would increase to over a million during festivals like Pentecost. The city would be packed with Jewish pilgrims from all over the world. As well as welcoming pilgrims Jerusalem was home to many immigrants – people who came from distant countries all over the Mediterranean Basin. There were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontic Greeks, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Cyrenaic Libyans, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs – and nearly all of them spoke languages other than the languages of Palestine. (Acts 2:9-11)

And so, when this enormous crowd gathered in the city center, and when each one of them heard the Galilean Christians speaking to them in their native tongue, you can imagine their shock! Some of them were so taken aback that they sneered at the apostles and accused them of drunkenness. (Acts 2:13) But for many of those foreigners this was a revelation. Not only were they hearing familiar language, they were hearing life-changing words about “God’s deeds of power.” (Acts 2:11) Instead of feeling isolated and voiceless, second-rate citizens in a foreign land, they were hearing a message that included them as valued citizens of God’s Kingdom.

So our Feast of Pentecost, occurring 50 days after Easter, is a celebration of God’s all-inclusive love, a love that pays no attention to geographical boundaries, or to differences in language, race, culture, or any other distinctions that can so often cause division and conflict between human beings. That’s why there’s been such an emphasis on loving one another over our past few weeks of lectionary readings. Those were chosen as a lead-up to the explosion of love that occurred at Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago. After all, in the words of our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry: “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God!”

But it wasn’t only the miracle of multilingual communication that made that Day of Pentecost so momentous. There were two other important occurrences that took place even before that.

I’ve already mentioned that Jerusalem was bursting at the seams because of the Shavu’ot festival. But the apostles were together in one place and the rest of the population was scattered all over the city. The reason the people gathered in the place where they were able to hear the apostles speak, was that God called them there in an amazing way – with a sound from heaven “like the rush of a violent wind.” (Acts 2:2) It filled the house where the apostles were staying, and it was dramatic enough to bring people running from all directions. It would have been as though God turned on a divine tornado warning siren – something no one could ignore.

So another significant aspect of Pentecost is its reminder of the power of God; of God’s ability to capture our attention and get us to focus on what’s really important. For people in the first century, a freak noise from heaven would do it but these days we understand that God uses all manner of means to get our attention. It may well be the wail of a siren that motivates us, but we can be equally inspired by that “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) that spoke so powerfully to Elijah long before the time of Jesus.

The important thing is not *how* God calls to us, but that we answer that call.

In the midst of the howling wind on that long-ago Day of Pentecost, another phenomenon occurred: “Divided tongues ... of fire appeared among (the apostles), and a tongue rested on each of them.” (Acts 2:3)

Three years earlier, when John was baptizing people in the River Jordan, he said to them: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16) As Peter points out, this referred to the fulfillment of God’s words through the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit ... And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.” (Acts 2:18-19)

Throughout scripture there are countless references to refining fire. It signifies how God burns away everything that is corrupt in our hearts and in our lives. God purifies us so that we can speak the words we're called to speak and do the work we're called to do.

In our "History of Christianity" series this past Wednesday, we heard the story of John Wesley, one of the fathers of evangelism. Wesley heard and paid attention to God's call. He was baptized by the Holy Spirit when, as he described it, he felt his heart "strangely warmed." He went on to preach in places where no church buildings existed and where the people had never received any attention from a man of God.

Wesley spent much of his time in the hostile mining towns of Somerset – where, for the first time, the miners heard a language they could understand. It wasn't that Wesley suddenly started speaking in their native tongue; they were all English, after all. The language he spoke was a language of acceptance and understanding. By bringing them the message of God's love and salvation, he restored their dignity; by listening to them, he gave them back their voice.

Here at St. Paul's, God's voice has been heard in many powerful ways over the years. One striking example is our vestry meeting this past Tuesday, when we voted to endorse both the Poor People's Campaign and the work of the Immigrant Solidarity Network.

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church because it's the day the Holy Spirit brought into being a love that surpasses human divisions and breaks down barriers that can grow out of fear, ignorance, greed, and mistrust.

It's the birthday of the Church because it's the day God confirmed that we are always within hearing of God's voice – and that our life purpose can only be fulfilled when we listen and respond to it.

And it's the birthday of the Church because it's the day we received a gift of language – both speech and understanding – that unites us more strongly with our brothers and sisters in the world, and allows God's message of love to be shared more widely and effectively.

Whether we're working in the Food Pantry, or travelling to Jamaica, or taking part in a rally at the State House, we're all hearing stories of suffering, injustice, despair, and need in a new way. We're compelled to respond, and, in that response, we speak a new language. It's probably still English but, like so many Christians before us, we're mastering a language of acceptance, understanding, and love that can change the world.