

## PENTACOST OPP

June 4, 2014

Psalm 104: 24-35

Acts 2: 1-21

1 Corinthians 12: 3-13

John 20: 19-23

Today is Pentecost Sunday, about 50 days after Easter, and also called the birthday of the Christian church. It is also the Jewish feast of Shavuot, celebrated 50 days after Passover, when Moses was given the law in Sinai. They are, in fact, sort of the same thing, since the disciples and the followers and the helpers and the women, in fact, 120 people of whatever description were all gathered in what has come to be called "the upper room" to celebrate Shavuot. It was then that the happenings occurred which came to be known as Pentecost in the Christian church. And, as recounted in the reading from Acts, they are quite some happenings indeed. As you heard, a great wind began to blow, and divided tongues of flame came among them, and it seemed that of the many languages among all of the people there - the Parthians, the Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Libya, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, they could both understand and speak all of them. Some people thought they were drunk, but Peter said, no, that could not be as it was only 9 o'clock in the morning and besides he knew that the prophet Joel had prophesied such things, as your old men dreaming dreams and your sons and daughters prophesying and your young men seeing visions and your slaves having the spirit of God. All that happened in the Upper Room 50 days after Passover and Easter. Sounds like Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds, doesn't it? And it is true that this event and others like it have often been thought of as a sort of party, a place where people's inhibitions were released and they were therefore able to

be free with one another in ways that they never had before. To dream dreams and inhabit visions often sounds like a sort drug or booze induced landscape that would never get past the imagination of one individual. But actually, in the words of the passage from Acts, speaking in tongues gave the people on the Upper Floor the ability to understand and to speak in all the different languages that were represented in that room. And to speak and understand a language is to communicate with people, to form partnerships and to begin to get things done together. So instead of partying, they were beginning to do business.

Now for us to be prompted to discuss language and its uses at this time seems a wonderful opportunity, right? We, in this country and at this time, are beset by uses of language that are amorphous, imprecise, vague, nonsensical, false, claptrap, hokum, quackery, and, yes, fake. Many of these terms are taken from Princeton University's Harry Frankfurt's essay titled "On Bullshit" in which the author attempts to define that concept. We live in an era right now in which sadly our public conversation appears to be taken over by precisely this notion and our precious languages, so carefully wrought over the eons, are on the verge of losing their meaning. Remember, if you have ever learned a foreign language, how difficult that is, what a treasure it is to gather up that vocabulary, to be able to speak with greater and greater variety and precision and accuracy. I don't hark back to the acquisition of our own native tongue when we were babies, for my brain no longer recalls what that was like. But think, in those days of early learning of a foreign language, if you would ever throw those words out to the winds as if one were the same as any other, as if gorgeous were the same as ghastly, delightful as deplorable? No, never, you would never throw things around like that, you would speak deliberately so that people knew what you meant because having acquired it, you knew that language was a valuable treasure. And, think in the early days of language itself, of a few people in a cave around a small fire, perhaps, practicing the verbal symbols for the objects and actions that they knew together. How

precious these symbols must have been to them, to their ability to work and live together rather than in solitude. One cannot imagine that they would throw them carelessly about as though one were the same as another.

And yet here we are in 2017, with a plethora of vehicles with which to communicate with one another instantly, all over the world, through written or verbal language, and yet we are scarcely able to understand one another. Now I do not necessarily mean this to be between individuals, although that may be true as well, but rather at the level of government or media or other large scale communication. But at that level, there is a deliberate effort to smear the clear and precise meanings of words so that confusion is rife and intent is never betrayed. And this is not just one person or group, it seems to have become a style, a way of swaying public opinion, so language, the tool that we, homo sapiens, have used since we developed it to gather our forces and build farms, schools, churches, towns, nations, corporations, federations, and almost anything a human could think of, that tool, language, is being debased so that it becomes useless. It is useless if its meaning is not trustworthy - if the sense that the word that I spoke to you last night is not the same sense that it had today. It is as though language, which we depend upon more than anything, is being weakened and diminished, just in the way that currency can be weakened and diminished.

In building community, whether it be small and intimate or enormous and international, we cannot negotiate if we do not have a common pool of language and information upon which to rely and from which to draw. Democracy demands that we and our partners, or our opponents, have a common set of tools and facts. We can argue about what's most important but we have to share the same basic understanding of the facts.\* In order to work together, we cannot say that the facts, or the language, the tools that we are using to build with, we cannot say that these things do not matter.

We cannot say that what comes out of my mouth one day may be totally different the next day and it will make no difference to the outcome. You cannot say that, because in doing that there is nothing to rely upon. It creates the kind of panic that ensues in financial crises - if there is no currency to trust, there is nothing to rely upon and therefore everything is in free fall.

On the day of Pentecost when the big wind and the flaming tongues allowed everyone to understand and to speak to everyone, on that day, the book of Acts says that 3,000 people joined the group that were with the disciples and the followers. I would say that is a demonstration of the security of language as a reliable tool when used in a straight forward manner. I understand the words that you speak and I understand them to mean what you think. Therefore, I can trust you. Those 3,000 people could trust one another. Now, of course, there was more to it than that, because they believed that the great wind and the flaming tongues came from God's spirit, so there was a lot more reason for them to trust. Still and all, it was a good start on international verbal understanding. Those 3,000 plus people would then go on to expand and to travel the Mediterranean world to establish various Christian churches and communities and nations and cultures. It was a powerful understanding, and here we are at the Beaverkill Community Church, still a part of it, after all those years.

And because we have this understanding, because we still speak and rely upon our words for clarity, I want to ask you to please make an extra donation to the plate for the roof of this building which is going to need to be replaced at the end of the summer. Yes, a new roof is need for our Beaverkill Church. Thank you so much!

\*Brooke Gladstone, "The Trouble With Reality", 2017