

## PENTACOST OPP

June 6, 2019

Psalm 104: 24-35

Acts 2: 1-21

Romans 8: 14-17

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. The two are, in fact, sort of the same thing, since the participants in Pentecost, that is the disciples and the followers and the helpers and the women, in fact, 120 people of whatever description, they 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. 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. That is what Joel prophesized and that is what 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 of drug or booze induced landscape that would be only in 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.

This description in Acts of the coming of the Spirit is a bringing up to date of similar scenes from the Old Testament, and the list of nations in Acts may be taken as an update of the nations found in Genesis 10. Also, this new community of nations is remarkably inclusive - in terms of gender, ("your sons" and "your daughters"), age ("your old people and your young people") and, in fact, "All people", which we can take to mean ethnically inclusive.

Now for us to be prompted to discuss language and its uses at this time seems a wonderful opportunity. We, at this time, in this country and around the world, 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, precisely because many people care nothing about the meaning but only about the attention that speech can gather. 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. 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 2019, 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 cannot trust what we see and hear nor, often, understand it. Social media has enhanced our ability to create meaningful community, but it has also put us in danger of chicanery. Often,

as you all are well aware, 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. "Social media is opening out society, undermining some fixed institutions, subverting established authority, leveling hierarchies and unleashing energy. Some of the changes are scary, some unwelcome, but together they can and do provide influence and connection and visibility to the many, not the few. (For the church, we can see that) authority cannot be controlled by the powerful and the qualified, and God can't be limited by clergy or Scripture. (It may be unsettling), but it can help to create a spiritual life that is more radical, more wonderful and more joyful than most would dared to have believed in. If social media pushes Christians, reluctantly, grudgingly and tentatively to recognize the uncontrollable nature of the Holy Spirit, it will indeed have proved a blessing."\*

For 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.

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 much 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 churches and communities and nations and cultures. It was a powerful understanding and it is the understanding upon which much of our life is based. And here we are at the Beaverkill Community Church, still a part of it, after all those years. Let us do everything that we can to keep it meaningful and joyful.

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

\*\*Wells, Samuel, St. Martins in the Fields, London