

Learning to hear each other

Rev. Jim Cullen –May 23, 2010

There is a commercial on radio. The lady says, “Dinners ready!” The man replies, “Who’s Eddie?” It a commercial for hearing aids. It is a reminder that one of the challenges we all have is communicating with each other. What is said and what is heard can be very different. Sometimes when we do not hear a whole story we fill in the blanks and end up with a number of distortions. Added to this is the difficulty we have in sharing emotional experiences.

Many of us have attended a concert, listened to a speaker, and even watched a TV show or movie that has a profound impact upon us. The experience is more than an intellectual one. It changes how we think about something. It may even help us see ourselves differently. We try to explain the experience to someone else. We use adjectives like wonderful, meaningful, and awesome - words that mean something to us but not the hearer. The fact is that there are experiences in life that are so personal that our words fail us. We just do the best that we can.

This is what happened at Pentecost – 7 weeks after Easter. We celebrate Pentecost as early at May 10th (1895 & 2285) or as late as June 13 (1943 & 2038).The story left those present speechless. What words can be used to describe the presence of the Holy Spirit of God – the coming of God’s Spirit upon those who would make up the early church. The writers of the New Testament just tell us what they experienced, what it meant to them.

They are somewhere in Jerusalem in a large room, perhaps the same room where they had the last Supper with Jesus. What they bring here is the one thing in common. It is still only weeks since they were shaken to the core by the news that Jesus, whom they had seen die, was among them. Many of them experienced his new presence in ways they could not put into language. But they are all absolutely agreed that his presence was a reality – not dreamed, not imagined, not wishful thinking – a reality.

The atmosphere is electric with excitement. Something special was happening. Perhaps it was the strange silence. Some years later a doctor in Antioch tried to explain the moment. His name is Luke. He gropes for words – magnificent words.

They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house, where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested in each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

We can take this story in several directions. Perhaps we can understand the story better when we look at the results of the experience. I would like to pick up on just one. The gift of “other languages”. The gift of “other languages” enabled the Jews from many nations and languages who were living in Jerusalem to understand the speakers.

This text is full of rich symbolism. “Wind” and “fire” are classic images for the Spirit in the Hebrew Bible. The gift of universally intelligible language deliberately echoes the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in which humanity was fragmented into language groups. The coming of the Spirit is the reversal of Babel, the beginning of the reunion of the human community. Then Peter speaks and interprets the descent of the Spirit as the fulfillment of God’s promise for the “last days” In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.

He goes on to say that the same Spirit that conceived, empowered, and guided Jesus now does the same within the Christian community as it spreads from Jerusalem (the centre of the Jewish Community) to Rome (the centre of the Gentile world).

Let's think about this idea. Pentecost is about people being able to hear and understand each other. When this happens community is built. It was God's Spirit that enabled them to understand each other and that gave them a solid base for the early church to grow.

We can think of lots of examples of how good communication builds relationships and poor communications tear people and organizations apart. Even when two people have a conversation there can be two understandings of what is being said. What one person says is not always what the other hears. Sometimes we are not very clear in what we want to say. Sometimes we do not understand what we hear. We ask ourselves, "What is this person really saying?"

The OT story in Genesis is the story about people who concluded they didn't need God and to prove it would build their own CN tower. God's response, according to the story, was to confound their tongues. In other words if they could not understand each other, the project would fail. Now at Pentecost we have the story that they can understand each other and they will be able to go forward.

God uses our words. What we say, how we speak, what we have to say has the opportunity to build or destroy. Our words, like the *wind*, can be refreshing or devastating. Our words, like *fire*, can warm or destroy. Whatever happened at that gathering at Pentecost, their lives were changed because they knew that the Spirit that was in Jesus would continue with them for all time. If they listened to each other they would have harmony in their lives and in their community.

We think of Pentecost as the "birthday of the Church". This is when we understand how God made it clear that the Spirit that was in Jesus would be with us always. "Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew."

Some words from Jim Ball. (General Council office)

"We are made to know joy and to be a blessing

To experience love and to carry the burdens of those who travel with us.

We were birthed to walk together, justly, humbly and lightly upon God's earth."