



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Pentecost sermon by Brent J. Eelman

“Word Abuse”

Acts 2: 1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ¹³But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.*

²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

On the first Pentecost, people from all over the world heard the disciples speak. This is the miracle: they understood what they heard. Pentecost is about language, understanding, and words.

I am amazed at the ability that we have to take a simple idea and give it a complicated and seemingly important sounding name. Recently the trend has been to add the word “solution” to a description. Everything is a problem! Let me give you a few examples taken from advertising...

- A “cell pack energy solution” is a battery.
- “Sustainable drainage solutions” are drains.
- “BT voice solutions” are phone lines.
- “Total document solutions” are paper and ink for computer printers.
- “Smart space solutions” are cupboards.
- My favorite.. especially this time of year is “motorized impeller air moving solution.” It is a fan.

I have also made up a few of my own.

- “Total external visual solution”: A window.
- “Multi-tension stringed, tonal solution”.... Guitar.
- Or “Quadrapped semi-prone relaxation solution”... a chair.

We do strange things with words and often those things often obscure the truth. Consider: politicians explain: “That statement is no longer operative.” It means it isn’t true? It is a more palatable way to say: “I lied.”

Two years ago, I had to have an outpatient medical procedure. We went through all the pre-certification procedures with the hospital and the physician, but it had to be rescheduled at a different facility. Apparently the insurance company was not informed by the hospital of the rescheduling and I received a 14,000 dollar bill for the services. After some conversation with the insurance company I was required to apply for (get this) a “retro-active pre-authorization.”

We do strange things with words and more often than not, what we do with words impedes our ability to know the truth. This is word abuse. I am not one of the grammar police nor is this a lesson in word usage. My concern is that language, communication and understanding are at the heart of our faith. Language is a gift from God. It is one of the things that make us human. It is a gift that is the foundation of human understanding and peace. Our abuse of words is an misuse of a gift that God has given to us.

Language and words are at the heart of the biblical story. The creation story in Genesis states that God spoke and the world was created. Such is the power of divine language! The “Word of God” creates. The story of the tower of Babel is a testament to the power of language. At one time the world all spoke one language and everyone understood one another. Words communicated messages clearly between people. Then something happened. Human pride got in the way and suddenly we are scattered in different lands, speaking different languages: no longer communicating.

Ironically, we can currently speak the same language and not understand each other. Sociologists tell us that men and women use language differently, and hence this is often the source of misunderstandings between couple. Preachers and congregations also have communication issues. I discovered a long time ago that what I said and what a congregations heard could be two different things. Our use of language and words are often obscured. Perhaps we need a “total language/communication solution”.

This is the message of Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit is God's "total language/communication solution." It is the reversal of what happened with the Tower of Babel, when people became confused and didn't understand each other. Pentecost was the moment when words fulfilled their divine purpose:

- to communicate,
- to foster understanding, and
- to tell the truth.

On Pentecost, the disciples spoke in tongues. This was not glossolalia: the ecstatic utterance that we hear about in "holy roller" churches. Pentecost was the restoration of language. It was the reversal of the Tower of Babel! The abused, humiliated word was suddenly clearly understood by all. It was a phenomenal event. People from all over the ancient world suddenly heard and understood in their own language.

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. They were amazed and astonished."

Four quick points:

1. Language is a gift from God given to humanity for the purpose of communicating with each other. Language has precision and the ability to transmit truth and deepen understanding. This is the proper use of words. Pentecost stands as a reminder to Christians about the importance of language, not only in our sinfulness (Babel) but also in our salvation. We need to be good stewards of our words, using language to clarify and point to the truth, rather than obscure it.
2. This second point is quite practical and I wish someone shared it with me when I was younger. Words are the primary vehicle of truth. Today we denigrate language with sayings "It's only words." Or "A picture is worth a thousand words.". We need to challenge the assumptions behind those assertions. Pictures and images may tell a story, but not the truth. Christians are committed to truth! We need to expose language that hides and obscures the truth.
3. Christians who are committed to understanding and fulfilling the message of Pentecost need to be committed to learning and speaking different languages. Our world is getting smaller and smaller and we are bumping into each other in some extremely uncomfortable and often violent ways. One of the major crises that our nation faces in the area of diplomacy is the reality that we have few people who are competently versed in other languages.

I just returned from the Netherlands. Everyone I spoke with spoke English, German and often one additional language. I discovered they studied English beginning in the first grade and that 93% of the population can converse in English. In the world we live in, language is the key to understanding amongst peoples. We need to recognize that the ability to speak and understand different languages contributes to quality of life as well as a more peaceful world. The story of Pentecost reveals the power of language and words to create understanding among peoples.

In some ways, this is as strange a sermon as I have probably preached. But Pentecost is in so many ways a strange yet wonderful event. At the heart of Pentecost, the giving of the spirit to the disciples, was the gift of words. And with that gift we were granted the gift of understanding, communication,

truth, reconciliation, and the promise of a good future... This is the foundation of hope. A church that is filled with the spirit is not one that is exciting, jumps around and is happy. It is a community of faith that 1. speaks the language of truth, 2. understands the language of truth, and 3. shares the language of truth.

I continue to be amazed with the way that we abuse the gifts that we have received from God. More often than not, we look at the earth and rue the way we have abused it. But we also abuse the gift of language. We abuse words. Language is the gift that enables us to know the truth: the truth that sets us free.

The abuse of language obscures, hides and perverts the truth. On this Pentecost Sunday we are called to remember the clarity of language of that day, and we are called in the name of Christ, who is the way and the truth to continue it. Amen.