

"THE LESS SAID THE BETTER"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Feast of Pentecost, May 26, 1985

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For instance, what about the language of music. I know I came to appreciate some time ago in ways that I had never experienced before the meaning of the gift that God gave us in Jesus Christ by listening to the music of Bach. It came to me in a way that words could never express, through the preaching and the playing of Bach's music. And then the language of action is another way. That's why we sometimes will say that "actions speak louder than words". In that instance it is literally true that "the less said the better."

Or, what about the language of touch. The embrace. The hug. Yes, words have their limit.

BUT..NOT HAPPY WITH THAT But I was not happy with that, because it is really avoiding the issue that Pentecost poses to us. The fact is that Pentecost was about words, words that changed things and created a new reality, just by being spoken. What were those words? Or what was it about those words that enabled them to make such a difference, enabled them to be understood by all people.

You don't have to live very long in this world to discover that that's something of a miracle. It's so hard to be understood, even by people who speak our own language. Remember that movie, "Cool Hand Luke"...and the warden and how he was really describing the human condition when he said, "What we have here is a failure to communicate". That's the human predicament. And in the setting of that movie the predicament could never be overcome.

The Good News of the Christian Faith is that it can be overcome, through the gift of the Spirit. Failure to communicate is the human problem. We have to be sure to pick the right words. You can tell a woman that her face has a timeless beauty, and you're saying one thing. You tell her that her face will stop a clock and you're telling her something else. You may have tried to say the same thing but you didn't choose the right words and so you're in a heap of trouble. What is said in innocence, and with the best motivation, is often misunderstood, either because of the way it was said...the context in which it is said...or the way it was heard. Why is that? Why is it so hard to communicate?

STORY OF BABEL Well, that question is answered in the Old Testament reading for this Pentecost Sunday - the Story of the Tower of Babel which

Dennis read a few moments ago. It's a diagnosis of our failure to communicate. It's an ancient story used originally to explain why there are so many languages in the world, why people can't understand each other and why that lack of communication separates people.

The details of that old story are not important as history. I think what is important is the message of the story. That's why it's in the Bible. The message of the story is that the confusion of tongues that all of us experience is not the way life is supposed to be. The message is that misunderstanding is the evidence that something is wrong in this world. Confusion of tongues is the symptom of our alienation from each other. It wasn't the confusion of tongues that caused the alienation; it was the separation from God and from each other that produced the confusion of tongues. That means if there could be reconciliation then there would be communication. And if there is communication - real communication - then there is communion and community.

STORY OF PENTECOST

The story of Pentecost is there as the "sequel" to the Story of the Tower of Babel. Peter preached the message of reconciliation. Notice the way the story is told. It says that people from all nations of the world were in Jerusalem when Peter preached that sermon; they were all there. People of all different tongues were there...and everybody understood. Everybody. If you want to know what the Church is all about, you look to the event in which the Church was created. And that event, as you know, was Pentecost. The Church, it says, is here to say the words that will reconcile, that will heal, that will unite, that will build community and understanding among all people everywhere.

You and I know that the world is still a Babel of tongues. Division is still the reality in the world rather than unity. And I'm afraid that is true even inside the Church. That's the scandal of the Church. The fact is that there are still Christians who cannot gather with other Christians at the same table, at the very Table of our Lord. That's the visible evidence that Babel still exists, even inside the Church. So Pentecost is not the description of our world; Pentecost is the description of our mission. Pentecost is what we are supposed to be about.

If we're not saying things to one another in the world that unite, if we are not saying things to one another in our community that bring us together, if we are not saying things to one another that forgive and reconcile, even within our own families, then we're not the Church. The Church is born in Pentecost, in the message of reconciliation that all people understand.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Noam Chomsky, the linguist, has pointed out that what we say shapes the world we live in. And I believe he's right. Think about it. That's why the Bible says, "In the beginning was the Word". The word is always in the beginning for words create. The way you describe something is the way it will be. You take a rock and call it carbon and that's one thing; you call carbon a diamond and it's an entirely different thing. Tell a child that he or she is nothing and you will shape that child in one certain way. You tell that child that he or she is precious and you'll shape him or her in another way. "In the beginning was the word". It always is. Speech changes and shapes the world we live in. If you remember, in the Story of Creation, God brought all the animals to Adam to name. That means that human beings have the power of creation in their words, just as God does. You shape the world that you live in by the words that you speak.

Have you ever noticed that the groups that want to change society always begin by trying to change vocabulary? They want to change the words. The latest example might be the attempt by some to remove "male-oriented" language. That gets a lot of people upset, and it upsets them because it is not a word that they want to change - it's a world. Words shape the world we live in, and they know this. You change the words and you're going to change the world. You change the words, you'll change the way people see the world about them. And when they see it differently they'll live in it differently.

I think it was something like that that happened at Pentecost. Peter spoke words of reconciliation in a divided world and everybody understood. He told the Story of the Creator of all of life who has been working through men and women ever since Abraham. Which, incidentally, in Genesis is the 12th chapter. The Story of the Tower of Babel is in the 11th chapter. So immediately after the confusion of the tongues God begins to work through His people in order to bring the whole world back to Himself, to reconcile all people. And Peter concluded that sermon by announcing that in these latter days God had finally come to us Himself in Jesus Christ, to forgive us all that is past and to enable us to begin our lives anew - lives that now will be one with Him and one with each other.

It's something like that that Peter spoke at Pentecost. That's all he said. It was the same message that Paul preached to the Corinthians. "God was in Christ...reconciling...all the world unto Himself and calling us to be ministers of reconciliation". And everybody there heard in their own language.

It's like those stories that came out of the mission movement in Africa where the response to the telling of the Gospel story was something like this:

"We have belived in this God all along, but we have called Him by a different name".

The message of reconciliation is universal. It's a language that all people understand. It's as if we carry within us the memory of the Garden of Eden, that time before the Tower of Babel when life was the way it should be, when all life was one and all human beings were in one community together, and we know instinctively when the words of reconciliation are spoken, that this is the way we should be, the way our world should be.

CLOSING STORY I ran across a story of the time when the pioneers in this country were moving westward across the continent. From time to time, as you know, they had skirmishes with the Indians. And in those battles, sometimes the Indians would take small children away with them and raise them in their tribe. It seemed that in one of those raids upon a village in Tennessee, a little boy was carried off and raised by the Indians. Years passed and then another skirmish with that Tribe.

Some of the warriors were taken prisoner, and the commander noticed that among the prisoners there were braves who looked like white men. The commander summoned the mother who had lost the boy years before. He called her to look over the prisoners to see if her son was there. She walked along the line, looking into the faces in vain. It was hopeless. But then the commander asked the woman if she could remember any melody or song that she used to sing to her babies. The mother began to sing, and the effect was immediate. One brave

moved out from the line towards her and then stopped. They looked at each other for the longest time, and the mother continued to sing, the tears welling up in her eyes, until the man fell into her arms.

RECONCILIATION Reconciliation. There's something deep inside each one of us that wants that. If you want Pentecost to happen again, speak the words of reconciliation. Speak the words that heal and don't hurt. Speak words that unite and don't divide. Speak words that forgive and don't curse. You know what those words are. You know them. They are inside of you. And the need to hear them is inside somebody else. You know who they are. And you know what the words are.

Say them!

PRAYER Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy holy spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy holy name.

O God, give us faith shining through our tears. Plant peace and hope within our hearts and give us laughter in our souls. Create in us a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within us. For we come together to sing, to pray, to preach, to thy glory and always in the beautiful, strong name of the Living Christ, our Lord. Amen

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