

The Gift of Ears
Sermon June 4, 2017 – Guest Minister: The Rev. Herb Gale

Scripture: Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-13

Telephones are amazing inventions. They can connect people from the other side of the world... But have you ever made a phone call in which you never felt quite connected? If so, you can identify with this prayer-poem by Michel Quoist entitled simply, The Telephone:

The Telephone

I have just hung up; why did he phone?
I don't know...
Oh! I get it!
I talked a lot and listened very little.
Forgive me, Lord, it was a monologue, not a dialogue.
I explained my idea and did not get his;
Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing;
Since I didn't listen, I didn't help;
Since I didn't listen, we didn't commune.
Forgive me, Lord, for we were connected
And now we have been cut off.

Sometimes there is nothing lonelier than the sound of the dial tone at the end of a phone conversation. I'm reminded of a cartoon I saw picturing two psychiatrists coming out of their offices at the end of the day. One looks utterly exhausted, bags under his eyes, clothes disheveled. The other looks like he just stepped out of the shower, fresh and relaxed. The exhausted one turns to the other and sighs, "I don't understand how you do it! How do you listen to people's problems all day and still look so fresh?" The other replies nonchalantly, "Who listens?"

"Who listens?" Keep that question in mind as we reflect on the two scripture lessons this morning from the book of Genesis and the book of Acts. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is the story of the breakdown in communication. It begins with everyone speaking the same language and working together on a common project – a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens in order to "make a name for themselves." But in the process of the construction project, their language becomes confused, and in the

confusion they quit building the tower; and precisely what they feared would happen does happen: they are scattered to different parts of the world. “They were connected and now they are cut off,” as Michel Quoist would say.

The story of Pentecost in the book of Acts, on the other hand, is the reversal of the story of Babel, for it tells of the restoration of communication and the healing and reconciliation that follows. People, who were scattered across the world and spoke different languages, came together in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost. And when the Spirit fell upon the disciples, suddenly all the language barriers were broken down, and

Romans and Greeks,
Libyans and Egyptians,
Arabs and Jews...

All heard the disciples proclaiming God’s mighty deeds in their own languages. Communication was restored: They were cut off, and now they were connected!

Which raises a question: What exactly happened at Pentecost to restore this communication? Let’s look closer at the account from Acts and put the pieces of the story together... The disciples were together in one place praying. Suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind. Tongues of fire appeared over the head of each person. As the New Revised Standard Version says, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability” (Acts 2:4) The word translated as “other languages” in the NRSV is translated differently in other translations. For example, the RSV and NIV translate it as “other tongues.” Other versions read, “strange tongues.” The Greek word is *glossalalia*, which the Apostle Paul identifies as one of the gifts of the Spirit in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

A lot of discussion and good bit of controversy has arisen over the years about what actually happened that first Pentecost and what the gift of tongues or *glossalalia* really is. For Pentecostals, the gift of tongues is one of the key marks of being filled with the Holy Spirit and an integral part of their worship experience. For most Presbyterians, the gift of tongues is a part of the story of the first Pentecost that tends to make us a bit uncomfortable. Oh, we read about it when we read the Pentecost story because it’s right there in scripture, and we believe in the authority of scripture. But we quickly move on to other parts of the story. You might say we gloss over *glossalalia*!

But this morning, I would like for us to linger a bit on that part of the story and examine it more closely... At the sound of the disciples praising God in

tongues, a crowd of people who had come to Jerusalem from various parts of the world for the Pentecost festivities came running to where the disciples were meeting. And lo and behold, we read, “And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard the disciples speaking in the native language of each.” Hmm... Arabs heard them speaking in Arabic. Romans heard them speaking in Latin. Greeks heard them speaking in Greek. “How can this be!” they wondered. But others in the crowd scoffed, “What are you talking about! These guys are just filled with new wine... they’re drunk and talking gibberish! They’re just babbling!”

Isn’t that interesting! The disciples were all given what the Apostle Paul would call the gift of tongues, but not everyone in the crowd, it seems, was given the gift of ears! Some heard and understood, others heard only a bunch of people babbling away in strange tongues. From this perspective, the full and complete miracle of Pentecost that reversed the results of the Tower of Babel was not just the gift of tongues, or *glossalalia*, but also the gift of ears, the ability to really listen and understand. And what they heard, each in their own language, were words of praise for God’s mighty deeds.

It was the gift of tongues and the gift of ears, linked together, that reversed the results of the Tower of Babel and enabled people of all languages to hear and understand the gospel message. This is why the Apostle Paul instructed the Christians in Corinth not to speak in tongues during their worship services unless there was someone present who had the gift of ears and could interpret the message of the one speaking in tongues so that everyone present could understand what was said. Listen to what Paul says:

If anyone speaks in tongues, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and someone must interpret. If there is no one to interpret, let them keep silent in the church and speak to themselves and to God. (1st Corinthians 14:27-28)

In his book, *Communication as Commitment*, Harry De Wire asks, “What one factor can enable real communication?” His answer? “Only one human function can accomplish this: the art and spirit of listening.” That’s the Spirit of Pentecost, my friends, for only the Holy Spirit can enable us to really listen and understand.

Someone comes to church all her life and dutifully sits in the pew Sunday after Sunday. She sings the hymns and listens to the sermons... Then one Sunday she really hears the gospel, and her life is transformed. She has received the gift of ears... thank God!

A husband and wife live together for years, but don't really talk... or should I say, don't really listen to each other. Then one day, for some reason, the husband hears his wife and their life together is transformed. He's received the gift of ears... thank God!

There is no question that the many languages we speak today are a real problem for communication, but I am convinced that it is not so much the different languages that separate us from one another as it is our stubborn refusal to listen. This has become even more a problem in today's world of smart phones, Facebook and social media. Everyone listens to their own preferred media channels and apps, whether it's CBC or Global here in Canada, or CNN, FOX or Breitbart News in the States, each of them reporting news – or even making up news – in such a way that it simply reinforces our own outlook and prejudices. Research shows that news stories that are false or mostly false that confirm our assumptions are retweeted much more often than news stories that are correct but don't confirm our prejudices.

I am deeply disturbed by this trend, a trend that only seems to be getting worse after the recent elections in the States in which the divide between Republicans and Democrats has become wider and wider. I was watching CNN recently in which a panel of experts was speaking on the hot topic of the day; I think the topic was what President Trump meant when he complained about the “negative press *covfefe*” in his midnight tweet of the previous day. I say “speaking” because no one was listening – at one point the four panelists were all talking at the same time, each of them getting louder and louder as they talked over each other to get their point of view across until I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. It was just babble. Or maybe an example of *covfefe*! But it doesn't have to be this way. Pentecost shows us another way. We could ask God for the gift of ears...

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with a woman not too long ago. She was telling me about an Italian woman who had lived beside her in an apartment in Toronto. They literally bumped into each other one day as one of them was struggling to carry a load of groceries. The Italian woman spoke no English, and my friend spoke no Italian. But somehow help was asked for and help was given, and the two women carried the groceries into the apartment together. That experience started a friendship, and they frequently got together for coffee until my friend had to move away. “You know,” my friend exclaimed reflecting on that time, “I really miss her... We used to have the best conversations!” I would swear that she gestured with a slight Italian accent when she spoke of her friend. Yes, if we want to communicate badly enough, a way opens up.

My favourite story about this is told by John Woolman in his journal. John Woolman was a Quaker who lived in the States in the 1700s and dedicated his life to ending slavery. At one point, he was asked to visit the indigenous people of the Delaware nation in order to share with them his experience of Christ's love. After a long, arduous journey filled with many adventures along the way, he finally reached the Delaware village. He tells of his visit in an entry in his journal:

On the evening of the 18th (of June 1763), I was at their meeting, where pure gospel love was felt, to the tendering of some of our hearts. The interpreters endeavored to acquaint the people with what I said, in short sentences, but found some difficulty, as none of them were quite perfect in the English and Delaware tongues, so they helped one another, and we labored along, Divine love attending. Afterwards, feeling my mind covered with the spirit of prayer, I told the interpreter that I found it in my heart to pray to God, and believed, if I prayed aright, God would hear me; and I expressed my willingness for them to omit interpreting; so our meeting ended with a degree of Divine love. Before the people went out, I observed Papunehang (the man who had been zealous in laboring for a reformation in that town, being then very tender) speaking to one of the interpreters, and I was afterwards told that he said in substance as follows: "I love to feel where the words come from!"

Oh, my friends! One of the great gifts of Pentecost is the gift of ears – the ability “to feel where the words come from!” I had a sense of what Papunehang was talking about during the service of dedication for the new church building for Almanarah Presbyterian Church, an Arabic congregation in London. I was preaching in English and the minister, William Khalil, was translating into Arabic for the congregation. It is an interesting experience preaching with a translator. It can be a bit disconcerting at times, but the pauses can also give you more time to feel the words. At one point in the sermon, my own heart felt very tender, as John Woolman would say, and I felt moved to diverge from my prepared text and utter a spontaneous, “Hallelujah!” But at that very moment, just before the words were on my lips, they came out of the mouth of a woman sitting in the fifth row, “Hallelujah!” I could only smile and echo her, Hallelujah, with a Hallelujah of my own, which William promptly translated into Arabic, “Hallelujah!” Knowing smiles and laughter rippled through the congregation along with a few more spontaneous “Hallelujahs.” There was no need for a translator then. Yes, it is good to feel where the words come from! Hallelujah!

Let us pray during this season of Pentecost for the gift of ears. For make no mistake, if we are ever going to take the next steps along the path of healing and reconciliation, we will only do so as we learn to listen, really listen, to one another. It is not just a coincidence that aboriginal healing circles are also called *listening* circles. May the Great Spirit grant us all the gift of ears, the ability to feel where the words come from.

Let us pray...

O, Great Listener, send your Holy Spirit upon us as you did that first Pentecost. Give us the gift of ears that we, like you, might dare to listen and learn to feel where the words come from. Amen.

Prayers for Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Kitchener, ON

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

All loving and all giving God, we thank you on this Pentecost Sunday for the gift of your Holy Spirit and the power of redeeming grace unleashed into the world when you poured out your Spirit upon the followers of Jesus while they were gathered in prayer. Suddenly, a quiet prayer meeting was turned into a global mission outreach when thousands gathered to hear your message proclaimed in words they could understand and take to heart. And so from out of many nations, your church was born! For your capacity to bring unity out of diversity and new beginnings out of seeming dead ends, we praise your holy name. Thank you, O God, for your life giving and life transforming Spirit.

Gracious God, we confess that we have not always paid attention to the prodding of your Spirit nor trusted in your Spirit's renewing power. You call us to love our enemies, but we fall short of loving even those closest to us. You call us to unity in the body of Christ, but we maintain divisions and nurse old wounds. You send us into the world to be bold witnesses of your redeeming love, but we choose silence and miss opportunities to share the joy of Christ's resurrection. Forgive us, O God, for our failure to live out what it means to be your Spirit-filled people. Open us anew to your Spirit so that we might be moved to worship and serve you in a truer way, for we know that apart from you we can do nothing of lasting value, but with you all things become possible. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.