

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:24-34

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

[John 7:37-39](#)

Sermon for May 28, 2023

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians, 13:13)

If you look around the twelve windows that surround us here in our sanctuary, you see that they essentially represent the stages of Christ's ministry. We see it beginning with the annunciation and promise to Mary, then the baptism of our Lord in the river Jordan that launched that ministry on its glorious Way. We see in a window reminding us of the instruction Christ provided throughout that ministry, and in another the miracles that accompanied and confirmed that instruction as God's own guidance to His creation. And we conclude with the crucifixion, the Easter resurrection, and finally that miraculous event that we commemorate today, as we do every year, on the seventh Sunday after Easter, the world rejuvenating event we refer to as Pentecost.

So as we sit here in our church, we are in a sense surrounded by the life story of Christ, and how fitting it is that the final chapter of that story should represent both an end and a beginning, the end of Christ's earthly mission, and the beginning of our own, the mission of the church, a story that today, one thousand nine hundred and ninety three years later, is still being unfolded, year after year, day by day, Christian life by Christian life.

The passage from Acts we read this morning, and which we read every year at this time, describes the first Christian Pentecost. The followers of Jesus are gathered

together, quite possibly in the same upper room where they'd celebrated Passover at the Last Supper with Jesus.

Something very extraordinary happened during that gathering, although what exactly it was we'll never know for sure this side of heaven. Luke, the author of Acts, wasn't there, so the account he gives was based on what someone or some others told him. But whatever the exact physical details, we can say with certainty that the disciples had an experience of the power of the Spirit of God flooding their beings as they never had before, a power that thereafter completely guided and strengthened them in such a way that they literally went forth from that room and, over the course of a few decades, changed the entire world they knew. And what we can also say for sure is that what happened to them involved their voices, involved speech, and their ability to offer a message that all and everyone could understand. In other words, it involved a new language.

Way back in the eleventh chapter of Genesis the first book of the Bible, we find the terrible story of the Tower of Babel. It's the story of how God, for His own reasons, scattered people over all the earth and gave them different languages. Whether you take the story literally or not, it clearly reflects the deep spiritual insight that the inability to communicate with each other through a shared language is an insurmountable obstacle to bringing people together as a shared body with a shared purpose.

That chapter eleven brings to a close the first part of the book, in which the Bible traces human history from its very beginnings in the garden of Eden through the terrible fall and banishment from paradise, the beginning of human conflict in the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, the growth of that disharmony up to the point where God sent a great flood to destroy all but a small remnant of humanity in Noah and his family, and then the same problems coming back and mixing with pride to begin to build the mighty tower of Babel, the tower that would reach to heaven itself and thus symbolically replace God. And then we read of God's response.

In the book of Genesis, immediately following the story of the tower of Babel, the author moves on to the story of Abraham and Abraham's descendants, the collection of which comprises the rest of the entire book. So what the book of Genesis essentially shows us is God making several futile attempts to deal with the pride and contrariety and inherent violence of human nature, and then, so to say, starting over with an entirely new plan, a plan involving the creation of a new and peculiar people, a people who stand in a special relationship with God, and whom

God will then use to spread the message of that special relationship to the whole world as an invitation for everyone to join. And to so-to-say buy time for the creation of that people, God scatters the nations and confuses their languages.

And now we come full circle back to our upper room, and that extraordinary day when the Spirit of God and Christ is given to the disciples in the great miracle of Pentecost. And surely the sign and symbol and meaning of that miracle is to show that God's plan has now come to fruition. We may say that Christ came to teach the world a new language, a universal language, one that everyone can learn and everyone can understand.

I said earlier that we can never know for sure what happened in that upper room. But in reading about the Pentecost miracle, I'm always reminded of a clip I saw on the internet, and which I've mentioned before from this pulpit. It was of a young woman who'd been deaf since she was a little girl, and who had just had a cochlear implant and was now about to hear something for the first time since then. You see her and her parents and a medical practitioner. The medical practitioner fusses around with the equipment that will switch the implant on, and when she does so, she nods to the girl's parents. There's a moment of silence, and then the mother says this to her daughter. She says: I love you. And the young woman looks at her mother, and just looks at her, and then breaks down in great sobs of joy. And of course if you're watching, you break down too; there's pretty much no way you can't.

I can just imagine something like that being the sense of wonder and joy that somehow energized the spirits of those in that room that day, and of those who first heard them.

So we can call the Pentecost language the language of love, if we're careful to say that love doesn't mean what you find in romance novels. What then does it mean? It means hearing, truly hearing, that God loves us. And how does God love us? That we discover in one and only one way, by studying and meditating on the life, labor and words of Christ himself.

Love means self-sacrifice. Love means courage. Love means a hunger and a thirst for righteousness. Love means the power that light has over darkness. Love means a hatred of sin but not the sinner. Love means mercy and meekness and peace and purity and above all forgiveness.

Our gospel reading for today is from the seventh chapter of the Gospel of John. Let's read it together.

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (37-39)

The feast mentioned here is the feast of Tabernacles, the last and greatest of the three agricultural feasts, the feast of the final in-harvesting, when all the crops have been gathered and stored and the time has come for thanksgiving and peace and satisfaction.

And it is on the final and greatest day of that feast that Jesus stands up before the crowd and tells them: I am the source of your inspiration and health and life. I am the well-spring. If you have faith in me, then you also will become such a source. When the Jews were wandering in the desert, God told Moses to strike a rock with his rod, and out of that rock water flowed to replenish and nourish and sustain his people. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul takes that images and applies it to Jesus:

...and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. (10:4)

And surely this is the message and the promise of Pentecost. The Love of God and Christ has been given to the whole world, to each and every one of us. When we open ourselves to that spirit and accept its guidance, when we learn that language, we become part of a community of perfect understanding and mutual Christian love.

Does that mean our problems all disappear? Certainly not. Does it mean never showing spiritual flaws? Heavens to Betsy, no! I myself typically show several before getting out of bed! Does it mean blissful relationship with everyone? Would that it were so!

The disciples were not transported to heaven on the first Christian Pentecost. On the contrary, they were sent back into the world, to begin teaching the language of Christ's love to the rest of the world. And that process continues today.

The promise of Pentecost is not one of ease and comfort and material reward. The promise of Pentecost is the promise that history has a goal for each of us established by Almighty God, that there is direction for each of us from God for reaching that goal, and that who we are and what we do matters in God's unfathomable yet glorious calculation.

And so we pray in the spirit of water, the spirit of light, the spirit of truth, the spirit of life. These and others are images Christ uses in many ways to point to the same message: God's purposes, fashioned so long ago, have now, in Christ himself, been accomplished. The kingdom of God is at hand. Rejoice, give thanks, be at peace. The hard work is done, the grain is safe in the storage barns, the whole human family is gathered together at one great festival, with one language of love, one fountain of water springing up into everlasting light, one Way, one faith, one Savior, who is Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.