

## Sermon Pentecost, 2009

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, enkindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.

Once upon a time, hundreds of years ago, in a far away land, there is a story told about a time when all of us spoke the same language. We understood one another. Then, the story goes on, we built a tower to pierce the skies, to assert our power in the universe, and even to rival God. And because of our trying to be equal to God, our languages broke apart. We were no longer able to speak to and understand each other. We call this the story of the Tower of Babel. And to this day we call our incoherent, unintelligible speech, "babbling". From the dawn of history comes this story about our inability to speak to each other because of human pride.

Today, however, we have good news. We hear another story about God's Holy Spirit enabling us to speak to and listen to each other again. When God sweeps into our lives, we understand each other's words. When we are together, strengthening one another, celebrating one another's gifts, no longer building a tower to show our domination over one another, we can hear each other speak.

Being able to talk to each other is at the heart of the gospel. Speaking, hearing and understanding are signs of the presence of God. When men and women want to become leaders in a religious community they go off to seminary where they learn how to communicate their religious message. For all of us in our various callings, we need to learn how to speak about our faith to those

hungry to hear our message. Because at the very heart of effective ministry is effective communication. At the heart of living in community, in parishes, in families, in neighborhoods is the ability to speak, to hear, to listen, to understand one another.

Today, as a Christian community, we are baptizing a child into our midst. We are at the same time recommitting ourselves to the fundamental call of God to speak to and listen to one another. We receive this child into our midst to be joined to the body of Christ, and promise to model for William the behavior of a Christian. We commit ourselves to speak to one another as we would speak to Jesus Christ. We commit ourselves to listen to one another as we would listen to Jesus Christ. Because that, in fact, is what we do.

We commit ourselves to find the words to speak to those who are estranged from us. In my family there is one cousin who doesn't speak to the rest of us. We all manage to ignore this until there's a wedding or a funeral, some enforced family gathering, and then it is painfully obvious. With all our good intentions, this silent family member stands as a continual reminder that we are all flawed, sinful and limited people, needing the power of God to speak to and listen to each other.

We commit ourselves to find the words to speak to those who are different from us. What imaginative ways can we find to speak to each other across the lines of gender and age, over the lines of class and education? Over anything that can be a barrier between us? What creative ways can we find to strengthen our communication with one another? How can the good news of Jesus Christ be communicated best to each one of us?

We commit ourselves to find the words to speak, and the ears to listen to those who speak a different language from us. In our workplaces, in the stores we visit, in the places where we eat we are always encountering people whose first language is not English. How can we speak to and listen to each other in our city? What opportunities is God giving us to reverse the story of the Tower of Babel, to learn dependence and cooperation instead of arrogance and competition? To learn to speak and to understand.

I had a student whose first language is Haitian Creole. He is a faithful Roman Catholic, but Mormon missionaries had been visiting him regularly. When he had an assignment in World Religions class to attend a worship experience different from his own, he went to a Mormon service. Off he went on a Sunday morning, where he was warmly welcomed, and given earphones to listen to a simultaneous translation of the service into Haitian Creole for his benefit. Talk about taking communication seriously! What are we willing to do to make our good news accessible to those whose first language is not English? And accessible to people for whom our inherited metaphors, poetry, hymns and symbols have little meaning? How does the Holy Spirit inspire us to recast our good news into language for the 21st century?

We commit ourselves to speaking a word when a word is needed but when it would be easier to keep silent. I have a friend who went to a 4th of July picnic with his family a few years ago. When one of his cousins made a racist joke, my friend spoke up and said how offended he was by racist humor. A great pall landed on the picnic. His family members have never forgiven him for ruining

the picnic. He, of course, thought that the picnic had already been ruined. When have we kept silent in the face of something that needed a word, our word? How often have we walked away, or simply withdrawn rather than speak the word that needed to be said? Let us commit ourselves anew to speak when a word must be spoken by us, who belong to Christ.

Today as we welcome this child, William, into the body of Christ, let's recommit ourselves to the living of our Christian life. Let's celebrate the outpouring of God's spirit on us. Let's revel in the speech that is given to us, and our eagerness to listen to and speak to one another. Let's rejoice at the chance we have to say that God is at work in the world, that Jesus Christ is alive, that God loves us beyond our wildest dreams. Rejoice in finding words for a new millennium, words to speak and to understand today and tomorrow and forever.

With God all things are possible and so to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.