

The Miracle of Listening – Acts 2:1-21

Our reading from Acts this morning has to rate as one of the five best-known texts, I think. Mention the word ‘Pentecost’ and just about everyone can make some kind of reference to this text, however fuzzy or vague the reference may be. Many if not most would be able to say something about tongues of fire, and people speaking in tongues, even if their recollection was not very specific about who, and when, and where.

That’s one of the key problems with a “well known” text ... it’s so “well known” that there is lots that is known that isn’t in there, and often lots that’s in the text that isn’t known. Even the understanding of what the incident was about tends to get simplified and the details get confused as to what was actually happening. (If you want some good examples, ask any of the students in the bible class about who was actually doing what during the plagues in Egypt just before the Exodus!)

For example, when you think of this incident, do you picture a large group of people assembled, all jabbering away incoherently as if they were drunk? A chaotic scene with confusion reigning everywhere? If that’s the picture that comes to your mind, you are not alone. That is probably the most common view that people hold of this scene – and yet it is a picture that really doesn’t match the details.

First, how many were there and who were they? The “they” referred to as being “all together in one place” were the twelve apostles, Mathias having been just added to replace Judas. It was not a huge crowd of strangers upon whom the divided tongues of fire rested, it was the small, intimate group of Jesus’ closest followers. Even the crowd who assembled in response asked, “are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” And as to the jabbering away, it was no incoherent babbling that arose from these people newly filled with the Holy Spirit – they were speaking in languages that people from other nations could readily understand. It would appear that some of the apostles were even gifted with being multilingual, as the list of languages / nations – some 15 or so – is greater than the number of apostles! Moreover they were not just babbling, they were speaking about God’s deeds of power. This was not just holy noise that they were generating, they were speaking in such a way as to tell anyone who would listen about God and what God had done.

This incident is for Luke the real beginning of the church. This was for him not some bizarre and curious event, but the starting point of the growth and expansion of the church throughout the whole known world. For Luke it was crucial to point out that the beginning of the church was not a people-event, but a God-event, an event in the holy city of Jerusalem from where the church would expand and grow throughout Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth like expanding ripples on a pond when a stone is thrown in.

And for Luke also the birth of the church was – and could only be – God-inspired, delivered with the arrival of the promised Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, supporter and sustainer, the Holy Spirit delivered as promised by God. Not in isolation, of course, not as a spontaneous and unconnected event, but as the sealing of the new covenant in Christ, the fulfillment of the promise made by the One who was himself the fulfillment of God’s promise of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, our Lord Jesus Christ.

That’s not quite the picture of chaos that we tend to remember this incident as being, is it? In place of a sea of incoherent babbling we have orderly if excited descriptions of God’s reconciling deeds being conveyed in ways that people other than just the insiders could understand. It would seem that we might do well to reconsider whether this is a miracle of the tongue, or a miracle of the ear. This is not so much a story of speaking as it is of hearing. This

is a story about the miracle of listening, for the devout Jews who gathered in response to the excitement not only heard about God's powerful deeds, they listened to Peter's explanation. This is a miracle of listening.

And so what a powerful model for the church this incident is ... and what a sadness that so much of the church that was founded in that moment has lost the model. Here we have a prototype of the Holy Spirit moving those who would constitute the body of Christ to reach out to peoples of other nations in such a way as they could hear, and listen, in such a way as to respect their culture, their language. The message of God's powerful deeds being proclaimed in such a way as others could actually hear it, and listen to it, and respond to it. How different is that from the way so much of the church proclaims that same message today? "Come, and learn our special churchy language of faith!" is proclaimed loudly in almost all corners of the global church. "Come into our friendly circle – at least friendly when you look just like us, and act just like us, and speak just like us, and worship just like us."

Can you imagine what the church – and the world, for that matter – would be like if we exercised the spiritual gift of listening? Can you imagine how those coming to church for the first time in years, or ever, might respond if we were to actually listen to them like we cared about them? Sadly, too many of us are so busy forming the next words to come out of our mouth that we don't really hear what is being said to us, even if it was us who asked the question! On my visit to Knox College in Toronto this week, I ran across a particularly blatant example of this from one of our denomination's well-known ministers. She would ask me a question about what I was doing – and like anyone else, I'm always happy to respond to a question like that – but about five words into my answer it was patently obvious that she wasn't even listening – mostly because she'd started to talk to someone else! Now I can let that pretty much roll off my back, but I'm sure you can understand how someone testing the waters at coming or coming back to church would never darken that particular door ever again.

Imagine what the church might be like if we followed this model in Acts, and like the Holy Spirit adapted the message of God's powerful deeds so that it could actually be heard by people outside the church! What would it be like if we were to proclaim that message not so much in pomp and circumstance and in nineteenth-Century Scottish/Irish ethnic rituals as in contemporary street language? How would the church blossom and flourish if we were able actually listen to the needs and wants of people outside the church, and then relate to them meaningful answers of God's redeeming love for them? Consider the consequences of the church stopping talking like a small, exclusive band of Galileans and drawing upon the Holy Spirit told the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that people not only could hear but would stop to listen?

This is Pentecost Sunday, the day the church considers as the 'anniversary' of the birth of the church in that miracle in Jerusalem. It is followed by the Season of Pentecost, the time that stretches across the Summer and the Fall right up until the Church Year starts over again at Advent. What better time is there to reach back and touch the roots of the church's beginning, to hear once again that defining model of the Holy Spirit's action of helping the church adapt the message of God's power in Christ Jesus so that the whole world might hear, and understand, and listen, and respond? What better time to re-energize the spiritual gift of listening with which we have been blessed, that we might hear the dreams and visions of a church upon which the Spirit has been poured?