

Power of Language
Pentecost May 23, 2010
Rev. Rebecca L. Kiser

A common thread between our texts this morning is communication, language, and understanding. In Genesis, God is responsible for the multiplication of languages and cultures, the variety of expression and the connotations of the many & diverse countries of the world - their different worldviews and syntax and vocabulary. Then in Acts, God is again responsible - this time for each of those languages hearing the gospel in their own tongue. In a way, it's a foretaste of what's going to happen as the disciples go out and take God's new salvation to many countries- even to Gentiles. Being in relationship with God is going from something the chosen Jewish race was carrying for humanity, to being open to the world.

Language is fascinating - words, meanings, nuances, shades of meaning, learning new words that open up new understandings. Using words, speaking, communicating, thinking, describing experience, creating an aura or mood, capturing the imagination with a story, stimulating the imagination to go further. Its all due to words. When my family had Billy living with us, our Congolese brother, it was fascinating to watch him not only comment on our culture, but to struggle with our idioms - often his word order was awkward, more from his own French background; and interestingly, he often confused our pronouns, he and she, and often gave inanimate objects gender - like the French language does. Last week, our Rotary exchange student, Merrett - who we met when she was being hosted by Jack & Kay - gave a presentation at Rotary, where she told about things she'd learned here, coming from Switzerland, what she'd seen of our culture. Her English was quite good, although you could tell from her accent on some words that it wasn't her first language. She had us all laughing from her dry humor and her perspective on things. She noted that in Switzerland, the word "ish" isn't a part of telling time - here, we say things like "9-ish" as a time the bus is leaving..... She also noted that in a recent call home to her dad, she told him a certain soccer game wasn't too far away, only an hour and a half.....and then said, in an hour and a half at home, you'd be in a different country.

Do you remember your children learning to talk? Their first words? Their attempts to name what they are feeling, and the power it gives them to be able to express

themselves, understand themselves, ask for what they want? The story of Helen Keller, as she momentarily discovers the link between the feel of water and the word water – that’s repeated time after time as we watch our young discover the power of language. My older son’s first word was “hot” with a strong “t” at the end - strange first word – I guess its because we said it all the time about out coffee cups, warning him not to touch them.

As they get a bit older – and this goes on all of life – and as we all learn more words, we get more discrimination in our word choices, and we see more clearly, name more clearly. When we’re young, its good to be able to tell green from red, for example. Depending on how observant we are, we then learn lime green or chartreuse, rose or cherry – and if we’re really into color, more and more, with tints and textures and all sorts of distinctions. My mom tried to teach my son about too many birds (she loved birds) too early – chicken, penguin, falcon, robin – he just invented the word “gu-gun” to cover them all until he got older. And I guess our muscles have to mature, too, to make different sounds. Speech therapists know what are the usually times for a child mastering certain letters, and have techniques for teaching certain sounds. I had trouble with the f sounds – my mom loved to tell folks that I couldn’t say “elephant,” so she taught me “pachyderm” instead. Who calls an elephant a pachyderm? I did.

The native peoples of Alaska, I learned, have 7 names for kinds of snow – we just say snow. Probably if we had more snow all the time, we’d learn to distinguish between types and have names for them, too. Wet snow when the temperature is a bit warmer, the little snowflakes when we’re in for a long storm; I don’t know – old snow, maybe, icy snow. We do have words like “fresh powder” to describe good skiing snow. I remember learning that the Greek of the New Testament had 3 different words that all came into English as “love.” Phileo, like Philadelphia, which was like friendship love, good friends, or as we said when we weren’t careful about gender word, brotherly love. Then there was eros, which means more like passion – both physical passion and the energy of passion for, say, nature, or books, or flying or creating. And finally there is a distinct word for Godly love, agape – the forgiving, accepting, caring altruistic kind of love.

So there’s a power of naming in words; a power that helps us think and discern. Like Adam naming the animals that God brought. Like giving a name to a child. Or the insight that comes by naming a new idea, and describing it.

Words have power also to build up or tear down. Again, in parenting, we've learned the power of what is said to children – the deep difference it makes in them between being told they are smart or they are stupid, for example. Words can hurt – quick words, angry words, thoughtless words. We can apologize, we can't un-say them. Words can comfort and heal; words can encourage. A recent change in our human perceptions has to do with gender bias in words – when I was growing up, we were told that using the male words were really generic for all humans – we said “Men” to mean all people; we learned mailman and milkman and read men working signs. Then we realized that leaving women out of these supposedly generic words was contributing to a tendency to devalue and overlook women, and we began to say letter carriers, people working, and humankind. Now someone talking in the old way is heard as being discriminatory. Words have power.

In our Presbytery guidelines for discussions – which can get heated with the great passion many folks bring to religious understandings – we ask for speakers to watch their words – words can shame, names can imply disrespect – feminazi, for example, or unrepentant. I was once referred to as a “so-called Christian” by someone angered at my beliefs, and fortunately the Moderator called them on it.

When the apostle John considered how to write the meaning of Jesus' life, he chose to use the Greek concept of “Logos”, or “Word.” You recall he starts off his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS God.” It parallels the book of Genesis, which starts out describing God as speaking creation into existence – God says, let there be light, and there was light. Nowadays in church we talk about Jesus as the Living Word of God, and think of that in terms of the power of God speaking a new creation into existence. Our Bible are the written word, which testifies to the Living Word, Christ. The very word, “Word,” takes on a large metaphorical and philosophical content, as a powerful, potent, expression of God's very self.

So we come back to the texts – the Genesis text where languages are invented, and then the Acts text where with the power of the Spirit, the Word of God is spoken in all those known languages of the day and communicated to all present. The Spirit is, among other things, the Great Communicator of God. The coming of the Spirit of God empowers the spoken words about the Word, spans all languages, and makes all understood. Jesus said of the Spirit that it would help the disciples remember and understand all that he taught –

deep communication. And he said in another place that the Spirit prays for us in words that can't be written – words that capture our innermost longings too deep for words – but the Spirit can communicate them to God on our behalf. A name Jesus gives to the Spirit is Advocate – which, with all the legal folks in our congregation, gives a new spin to my take on “advocate” - one who speaks for another, or on another's behalf, taking another's part, interceding for them. On the Law & Order TV shows, they call the lawyers “Counselor,” too – which is another name we use for the Holy Spirit. Its interesting to think of the Holy Spirit as our lawyer with God.

The coming of the Spirit of God upon all believers is a momentous event – we now have available within our hearts that great communicator, the Holy Spirit of God. The Spirit moves in and through our words as we speak **for** God; the Spirit moves in our prayers, out to those we name as well as interpreting our sighs **to** God. And the Spirit speaks inside our hearts what God wants **to say to us**, too. It binds us together in that great unity, that oneness we spoke about last Sunday, interpreting us to God and God to us, and us to the world and those we pray for. The Spirit does that and more – the Spirit en-courages us, restores our heart, teaches us to feel compassion and empathy, calls us to task where we miss the mark, and basically is the voice and energy and presence of God here in the world now.

We don't talk much about God's Holy Spirit in our denomination. Maybe its from all those years of using the word “Ghost”, that we felt silly using. Maybe we're afraid we'll start shouting out something. Maybe we're fearful of sounding flaky. Strangely enough, science is actually making talk about the power of prayer and things like that more legitimate topics, even outside of the faith communities. They talk more in terms of “fields” and “spheres of influence” and “energy,” but we of faith know they're finally discovering what God has told us all along about the power of the Spirit.

Today as we observe and remember the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit came with power on our ancestors and enabled them to communicate so miraculously with the folks in Jerusalem that day, may we be called to meditate on this great communication we have with God and about God, and call on the Spirit to keep working in us and for us in our journey of faith. AMEN.