

Sermon Pentecost Year B
May 20, 2018
St. James, Wheat Ridge

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Did you all hear about the word that broke the Internet this week?
There was this post that went viral
of a computerized voice saying a single word.
But what is that word?

Most people – almost 60% - hear the word “laurel.”
But a significant minority – about 40% – hear the word “yanni.”
A handful of people say they hear neither,
but hear something sort of like “Gary.”

So which did you hear?
Is it “laurel” or “Yanni?”
Or something else?

This happened on Tuesday,
and by Thursday, it seemed like the whole world
was consumed with this laurel versus yanni question.

The people who heard one word
simply could NOT understand
how other people could possibly hear something different.
IT'S THE SAME WORD!!!
How come you don't hear it the same way I do?

Sound engineers say that it's really not as mysterious as it seems.
It has to do with high frequency versus low frequency sounds.
Some of us have ears that are more attuned to high frequencies.
Those people tend to hear “yanny.”
Some are more attuned to low frequencies.
Those are the “laurel” people.

The quality of your audio equipment is another factor. Cheap speakers don't play the range of frequencies that expensive ones do.

But it's not just your ears or your speakers. It's also your brain. Neuroscientists tell us the brain fills in what it thinks the sound SHOULD be. Thus, everything we hear is shaped, in some way, by our previous experiences. We tend to hear what our brain expects to hear.

I think in many ways this helps to explain our current political situation. Our society is just so polarized. We are left to puzzle how it is that two people can look at the exact same set of facts, and from them draw such totally opposite conclusions. Now, I know that part of it is that too often we choose to only look at those facts that reinforce our existing biases. But still, I think there's more to it than that.

Take, for example, the debate over abortion. There are people on both sides of that debate who are absolutely convinced that God is on their side. And I can see both sides' points. What do you do when both sides are right, but their conclusions are mutually exclusive? And one side is NEVER going to convince the other. It's a paradox.

After pondering this issue for many years, I've come to the conclusion that God is neither pro-life nor pro-choice, but rather, God is pro-talking-about-it. There must be something about

the ongoing engagement with this issue,
the ongoing need to continue this debate,
that is good for us.

There is something about having to struggle
with irreconcilable differences
that God wants us to experience.

And so God may indeed be whispering something in our ears,
urging us forward,
urging us to take action;
yet how one person hears God's words
can be very different from how another person hears them.
And I think God may be all right with that,
even if it sometimes causes us considerable consternation.

Preachers have long been aware of this phenomenon.
They warned us about it in seminary.
The words that I say may or may not be the words that you hear.
I've seen this happen repeatedly,
often to my benefit.
I've had people tell me how much they appreciated a sermon,
only to discover that the part they loved was something I never said.
On the other hand,
I've also had people complain bitterly about a sermon,
but when I ask for specifics,
I learn they're mad about something I did not say.
Yet they still insist that they heard me say it.

And you know what?
Maybe they did.
Every Sunday before the sermon begins,
I ask the Holy Spirit to give life to my words,
which is just another way of saying,
"Lord, no matter what stupid things come out of my mouth,
please let them hear what they need to hear."
It's just all part of the Great Mystery,
part of serving a transformative god
who can take our pitiful efforts

and turn them into something else altogether.

Maybe that accounts for what happened on that Pentecost in Jerusalem,

so very many years ago.

There were many different languages being spoken on the streets of Jerusalem that day.

After all, it was a festival.

Pentecost was a Jewish holiday

long before it became a Christian celebration.

Pentecost is also known as the Feast of Weeks.

Leviticus explains how Jews are required

to observe the Feast of Weeks

fifty days after the Feast of Passover.

The word "Pentecost" is Greek, meaning fifty, reflecting that fifty-day countdown.

It's one of three great pilgrimage festivals

that Jews living near Jerusalem were required to attend

and to which Jews from other nations made pilgrimage if they could.

But a lot of Jews didn't live anywhere near Jerusalem.

A lot were the descendants of those

who had been carried off into exile.

Only a fraction actually returned to Israel.

Others remained in the foreign lands where they had settled.

They remained Jewish in their faith and practice,

So they continued to celebrate Pentecost.

But time and distance

impeded their ability

to understand the language that was spoken in Jerusalem,

in the Temple.

Historians believe these were the Jews in the crowd on that day of Pentecost described in Acts.

They came from the 16 different geographical regions named in the text.

They had some connection with the goings-on in Jerusalem.
But much of what was said and done in the Temple
was in a language that was foreign to them,
that they didn't always fully understand,
because it was no longer their native tongue,
the language they had grown up speaking.

So when each heard the followers of Christ
speaking about God's deeds of power
in what had become their own native languages –
giving life to their words –
it was a miracle indeed.

I wonder how many people today
can relate to those Jews outside.
How many of us know people who feel distant
and alienated from the church?
How many left the church a long time ago,
maybe as teenagers or young adults?
How many feel they would like to have a relationship with God
but feel so uncomfortable
with the culture of the present-day Church
that they don't think they can ever find their way back here again?

You see, it's an old dilemma.
But when the Holy Spirit descended on the group of believers
gathered together that morning,
suddenly they found they had the ability
to speak to the world in a way they'd never done before.
The Holy Spirit empowered them to do things
they could not have dreamt of earlier.

What languages do we need to learn to speak today
in order to communicate our faith to the rest of the world?
How do we communicate with young people?
With refugees?
With those living in poverty?
With those who think we're just a bunch of fools,

clinging to old myths?
How do we speak to them in a way they can understand?

Well, here's what I think.
I think first we have to ask how *WE* hear *GOD*.
What language does God use to speak to *us*?
God is always reaching out to us,
always looking for the language we will respond to.
Sometimes that language is music.
Sometimes it's nature.
Sometimes God speaks to us in the laughter of grandchildren,
or in sewing
or woodworking
or in the attentive gaze of a beloved pet.
Sometimes God even uses
a flawed, inadequately written
and poorly delivered sermon on a Sunday morning
to speak to us.
Because what the preacher actually says hardly matters.
What matters is what we hear.

And the Holy Spirit helps us with this.
As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,
we don't really know *HOW* to communicate with God.
Left to our own devices,
we don't have the right audio equipment.
WE don't know how to pray.

But the Holy Spirit intercedes
with sighs too deep for words.
It's a language we can't speak.
But the Holy Spirit speaks for us.
God, working with the Holy Spirit,
goes to extraordinary lengths to communicate with us,
inattentive and reluctant as we are.
God is an extravagant communicator,
using whatever means necessary,
to speak to us.

If God spends that much time and energy on communication,
surely we,
made in the divine image,
have the same obligation.
Once we have heard God's words to us,
maybe we will be empowered
in ways we haven't yet dreamed of
to share our faith with others.

It begins, you see,
with attuning our hearts to God.
Remember, we tend to hear
what our brain expects to hear.
Try entering into a conversation with God
expecting to hear what the Spirit is saying to us.
We may not all hear the same thing, in the same way.
But the underlying message WILL be the same for all of us,
and it is this:
We are God's children,
and we are beloved by God.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
shall be saved.

Amen.