

SERMON preached by Emily Rotch  
May 15, 2016  
At the Episcopal Church of St. John Baptist  
Thomaston, Maine  
Pentecost Sunday

The things, good Lord, that we pray for, give us the grace to labour for. Saint Thomas Moore

There are times when the Bible just blows me away. These lessons have been one of those times

lessons about uses of language juxtaposed in my head with wall to wall political coverage everywhere, all sides making their particular uses of language.

Beginning with the beginning . In the story of the tower of Babel God punishes men by taking away their ability to understand each other and then he gives the gift in the Acts lesson of understanding all languages and that gift the lectionary relates to the story in the Gospel of John of the gift of the spirit. Sometimes John calls this "The spirit of truth" I wanted to look at how all of these might be related, but I kept getting interrupted in my head by this little voice asking whether God has gone back to Genesis and done it again for the election of 2016.

If you start looking things up in Bible commentaries most of them see the Genesis passage as an attempt to explain why people speak different languages. Dig a little deeper and the story becomes an illustration of sin-the sin of pride, and the sin of believing that men and women don't need God. But there are always more levels to look at .( That's what fascinates me about scripture-one of the things in fact that brought me back to church.) There's always a connection from the ancient stories, the ancient truths to today. In this case, when I can bring myself to listen to the political news, it seems to me the various factions are speaking but not hearing, hearing but not listening. Just as in Genesis. Why is that a good thing? From personal experience it doesn't seem so. Just a few weeks ago, I had the experience of trying to explain to my dentists' receptionist that I hadn't replied to their cute e-mail asking me to confirm my appointment because there was no little button saying "confirm" to click. She kept telling me no problem, she was confirming it and I kept trying to tell her they needed to fix the e-mail. We weren't communicating and I ended up as frustrated with the secretary as I had been with the e-mail. She was probably equally frustrated with me.. The truth was, we each had a perfectly valid agenda, we were both speaking English even-but we were in different places and neither of us noticed.. We actually might have done better if we had been speaking different languages. Something similar happened with the physical therapist I've been working with. He mentioned that even if surgery improves my shoulder I would still have to be careful about how much weight I lifted: "No rocks." he said (he knows I'm a gardener). I guess I looked pretty surprised, which surprised him and I realized he was probably visualizing the older woman with the garden snips and the pretty basket of flowers-not at all what my gardening life usually looks like.(More's the pity) Again, if we had known we were basically speaking different languages that might have been useful. Could that be something to get out of the Babel story?

Circling back to our public life, politics on every level is very clever at using language in ways that allow a single speaker to say 2 (or more) things at the same time. I remember reading an

article during one of the George W Bush elections by someone who was astonished to discover that lots of campaign speeches used biblical language that tended to mean different things to liberals and conservatives, if they recognized it.. That may be a useful technique in a campaign but in the long run we might be clearer about who or what we were supporting if we could acknowledge those different languages and work to improve our understanding We're not going to do that until we can look honestly at our differences. Think of it: the left and the right having a conversation? A God who can rub our noses in our different ways of communicating starts to look pretty clever.

So..in the passage from Acts about the gift of the spirit, he gives back, not a common language but the gift of understanding many languages. So we don't have to work at this after all? ...I'm not so sure. I used to have a poster, bought for my oldest daughter in her teens, of a very cross orangutang saying: "But every time I try to see it your way, I get a headache." I kept it for a long time because it spoke to me too. Quite often we don't want to understand and the challenge becomes finding out what's going on in ourselves. John says the gift gives the power of forgiving, or not forgiving. A choice, it seems to me not only to allow the other person room to make mistakes but to understand what in the relationship is giving us a headache. I recently spent more time than usual with my very-different- from-me- brother .. His younger daughter moved south not long ago and she doesn't always answer her phone when he calls. "If she loved me, she'd answer." he said.. I couldn't resist it. "Maybe she thinks of love differently", I said..He eventually found out she did. And his head felt better. Real communication , like real forgiveness requires a willingness on our part to meet the other. Our middle son's wife, Akiko, is Japanese. .She came to America speaking limited English and toured the country, finding her way by drawing pictures of the place she was trying to find. Like the Grand Canyon. There must of been people who just couldn't or wouldn't help her but there were enough who did for her to find her way. It interests me that in doing what she did she was also introducing herself as an artist by using a visual language. The language we choose tells other people who we are. How they respond tells us who they are. A couple of years ago Trinity institute looked at how the language of trade, of money is often used to conceal the true price in costs to people and to the environment of the things we buy. Biologists tell us that plants and animals of all sorts communicate in ways we are mostly unaware of but we could learn and perhaps find out more about our place in this world.

In Pentecost, then God has gifted us with a remarkable ability. It's up to us to use it wisely; to respect and be attentive to both those inner and those outer voices..Amen

Grant us a vision, Lord,

To see what we can achieve

To reach out beyond ourselves

To share our lives with others

To stretch our capabilities

To increase our sense of purpose

To be aware of where we can help

To be sensitive to your Presence

To give heed to your constant call.

Power lines by David Adams