

“The Phonetics of Fire”

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

**Different portions of this sermon were preached at 10:30 a.m. worship and others at 6:30 p.m. worship.*

The closest I’ve ever felt to any kind of singular spirit sweeping through an entire city is in the fall of 2004 when I was living in Boston. Breaking the 86-year “Curse of the Bambino,” the Red Sox came back from a 0-3 losing streak against the Yankees in the American League Championships to win that series in Game 7 and then went on to sweep the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Championship in just four games. Boston was electric. My professors had already cancelled exams and classes that week. No one was studying. Everyone was watching. It was, I suppose, for a bunch of divinity school students – a lesson in sociology of religion – the religion of baseball that is!

The night the Red Sox won, people were hanging out of their windows screaming blowing air horns for hours; apparently there was no bedtime as families with kids of all ages were out partying in the

streets; fire trucks were parked at intersections allowing people to climb up top on their ladders and trucks and dance and celebrate.

The next morning as I took the subway to work, no one was standing shoulder to shoulder in awkward silence like most mornings. Everyone was talking to each other. People were handing out free papers and coffee. Random strangers were high-fiving. Grown men were embracing in tears saying they had been waiting for this moment their entire lives and never thought it would come.

When I finally did get to work that morning and walked into the Dana Farber Cancer Institute where I was a chaplain – even the hospital had a different air about it. It was an air of Hope. After all – the unthinkable had happened. The Red Sox had defied all odds and won. Imagine how that kind of win inspired people who were living with terminal

diagnoses. If the Red Sox could break the 86-year curse...maybe their bodies could defeat whatever disease was cursing them. This “spirit” – whatever it was that sweeping the city – it was palpable and powerful.

Of course the celebration lasted a few weeks...or really all year for Bostonians...but I’ve never experienced anything like that very first 24 hours after the win in my life. Everyone was happy...and they were kind to one another. Why? Because of a baseball game. And because, I think, there was one thing that brought everyone together in that moment – across all differences and divides – people were united as fans of the Boston Red Sox. Even people who weren’t fans of the Red Sox were happy for them because really...86 years is a long time to lose. We have our nonagenarians¹ with us in worship today...and they can tell you...86 years is a lifetime...right?!

So that was my spirit-sweeping experience. When the Red Sox won the World Series in 2004. I was in the right place at the

right time to experience firsthand that bit of history. Have you ever experienced a spirit-sweeping moment? A moment where an entire city or stadium or crowd or march or church of people was singularly united and focused and celebrating? Such an experience is life-changing because it’s heart-changing. It renews hope. It inspires vision. And new ways of thinking and dreaming and speaking. After all, the Red Sox went on to win again just a couple years later!

Now the actual day of Pentecost was set up to be a day of celebration because on this day, Jews were gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks. That is the second of the three great feasts of Judaism that are tied to harvests. The first is the Feast of the First Fruits, which is connected to the Passover. The second is *Shavuot*, which is the Feast of Weeks—the word *Shavuot* means “weeks”—and it occurs exactly 50 days after Passover. The word Pentecost means “fifty.” And the third is the Feast of Tabernacles.²

¹ 90-year-old and older

² George Mason, “Saying Power,” *Sermon preached at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas* (May 15,

2016), accessed on June 9, 2019 at https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/3530/.

Although these feasts are connected to the agricultural cycle for the purpose of making sacrifices at the Temple, they are more deeply tied to the story of Israel itself. Passover celebrates the deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Law—the Ten Commandments—on Mt. Sinai.³

So here we are at Pentecost, and Jews have gathered from all over the Mediterranean region in Jerusalem to make their grain offerings and renew their faith at this festival. Because they are all from different places, they speak different languages, and they don't fully understand each other. They go to the Temple to make their offerings, but they don't know each other as one people because they can't communicate in one language.

Even more this isn't just any random group of people from different places.

You see, the Parthians were an empire that threatened Rome from the East. The Medes

and Elamites are two of the greatest enemies of Israel. Cappadocia and Pamphylia are districts of great Jewish populations with many who would have rejected Jesus. Egypt and Cyrene are places where many missionaries came from to share the message of Jesus.⁴ So these folks were all over the place in terms of their relationship to Jesus and this new movement that was starting around his ministry in and around Jerusalem and Galilee.

Then all of a sudden, the Spirit shows up as a mighty rushing wind and fire. Two of the scariest natural forces, mind you...wind and fire...and together they are a deadly combo. But here, on this day, they combine to give life. There's that theme again – death giving way to life? Remember it from 50 days ago? The cross giving way to the empty grave?

What happens in this moment is remarkable. As the fire falls on the disciples' heads, they speak in languages so that all who have traveled to Jerusalem from their homelands are

³ Mason, *ibid.*

⁴ Timothy Peoples, "When God Comes Down," *Sermon preached at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas*

(June 4, 2017), accessed on June 9, 2019 at https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/4245/.

hearing them speak in their own native language – people are bewildered. Confused. Excited. Moved. Skeptical. Granted, these twelve disciples must have been speaking pretty loudly – like “breaking the curse of the Bambino” loud – because the people move to them. They crowd in to hear what is being said. And they understand!

I imagine that even for the skeptical and confused ones, just hearing their own language so many miles from home made them feel like they belonged...no matter who they were or where they came from or what animosities or fears they held against others. In that moment – they were united...not by a common language...but by diverse and specific languages that spoke to them each uniquely and personally of this common love and power of Christ.

If you’ve ever been to a country where you don’t speak to the language (ahem...like the Republic of Georgia!)...then you know it’s an amazing gift of hospitality when someone does speak your language...even just a phrase or two. It’s humbling too because

you now that you’re in *their* country and you should be speaking Georgian rather than having them apologize for not knowing more English! But there is something about this familiarity of our own native language that is comforting. And perhaps in this comforting moment, we are able to a message that might be more challenging or unexpected. The familiarity helps us release fear...and maybe helps us learn something new about faith.

And beyond our differently earthly languages is the language of God’s love...that is what allows us to cultivate understanding even in the midst of our diversity. It is not unity of thought, belief, or expression; rather it is unity in God’s Spirit...which as Pentecost shows us...is inherently diverse! At Pentecost the unity of God’s Spirit is enough to draw people together – even in their differences.

This kind of unified diverse speech, this Speech of the Spirit, is not about correct grammar and perfectly constructed sentences or theology. The language of the Spirit is about how our words

sound to one another. How they make us feel...what meaning they convey...how we are able to meet people where they are at – just as God meets us where we are at.

And this is why I'm calling the Speech at Pentecost the Phonetics of Fire.

Phonetics is a branch of linguistics that studies the sounds of human speech. Phonetics is concerned with the physical properties of speech sounds: their physiological production, acoustic properties, auditory perception, and neurophysiological status.

Phonetics as a research discipline has three main branches:

- Articulatory phonetics: the articulation of speech
- Acoustic phonetics: the acoustics of speech
- Auditory phonetics: the perception of speech.⁵

You see, in essence, phonetics is just very different than grammar. Grammar cares about what is correct in any given language when it comes to things like sentence structure

and verb conjugation and spelling. Phonetics cares about how something is articulated and how it is formed in the speaker's mouth and how it sounds and how it lands on the listener's ear, or how it is perceived.

Pentecost is not about perfect or unified belief or articulation of faith...it is about the unity of God's Spirit that welcomes all and meets people where they are. In this moment, the people are then given a challenging message that all are called to evangelize....to speak the good news to the world in the ways each of them has been gifted. And we are called to do the same.

On a day when the Jews were celebrating the gift of the Torah – the gift of Law or the 10 Commandments – the Holy Spirit comes down, not to say that that Law doesn't matter, but to expand our ability to communicate the heart of love in our Scriptures – the Word made Flesh – to others.

Instead of one language and one way of thinking, the Phonetics of Fire encourages us

⁵ Information accessed on June 9, 2019 at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phonetics>.

to think not just about what we believe and know to be true but what others believe and know to be true and how they might be able to hear something and understand it. There is a flexibility with the Phonetics of Fire, with the language of the Holy Spirit, that we are still trying to grasp today. It's a flexibility that allows for more people to come to faith and to show us what faith looks like...if we are willing to learn and be open to embracing that flexibility.

Today, our differences are sometimes linguistic; most often, they are things that are far more difficult to bridge than language – things like religion and politics and family commitments and loyalties and national interests and morality and ethical frameworks.

We are each given a unique voice by God, and we are called to share that voice with the world. Pentecost reminds us that we need to also pay attention to how we can make our voice the most effective for those around us to hear us. The Spirit of Pentecost is a Spirit of Flexibility and Innovation and a Spirit of Humility. For a moment, the disciples own

languages are put aside and they are given the language of these strangers, (in some cases their enemies!), to speak. Can you imagine?

If the next time you are in a situation where you are with people you know do not speak your same language – be it a literal language or a religious language or a political language or even a sports team language or professional language or maybe just a language of your own style or opinion or way of doing things...can you imagine how odd it would feel if all the sudden the words coming out of your mouth were not your normal ways of talking and speaking but you heard yourself talking and speaking like those who you oppose or differ with? Or maybe just like those who you thought you had nothing in common with?

No wonder people were confused and bewildered! I think the amazement was not just on the part of those hearing the disciples speak...but the disciples must have been pretty amazed themselves. It is really hard to adapt and learn to speak the language of others while being true to our own voice.

Maybe this challenge is the true call of Pentecost.

Pentecost reminds us that when we are not fully speaking God's love and good news in ways that all can hear – the Spirit will come and equip us to do so...if we are open to it. And not all of us will speak to everyone. Because we all have unique voices...some will speak to us and others won't. That doesn't mean they aren't also speaking the gospel.

I had my own Pentecost moment a couple of weeks ago in the Republic of Georgia. When our group arrived to worship at the Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi, the leading church in the Evangelical Baptist Church of the Republic of Georgia, I was asked by Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili to preach. I was given the text of the day from the Orthodox Lectionary – John 10: 22-30 – and had about 60 minutes to prepare. I prayed the Spirit would speak to me and swiftly give me something to say that would cross cultural and language barriers!

I focused my thoughts on verse 27: *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”* We had seen so

many sheep all over the country side and literally in the middle of the road the day before – so that imagery was fresh in my mind and I knew they could relate to it. I spoke about how hard it is sometimes to know if the voice we are hearing is God's voice or if it's our own voice or the voices of others and how can we know the difference?

One of the things I gave as a point of hope is that Jesus is our Shepherd and knows us as his sheep and that when he calls us, not only does he call us by name, he also knows the ways that we need to hear his voice – whether that's through literal speaking or another means. I shared the examples of the post-resurrection encounters with those close to Jesus and how varied they are.

Mary needed to hear Jesus say her name for her to recognize and know that the gardener speaking to her outside the tomb was Jesus.

Thomas needed to physically touch the wounds in Jesus' side to know that it was him.

The disciples on the Road to Emmaus needed to be sitting at

a table and breaking bread with him before they recognized the man they had been talking to on the road as Jesus.

And Peter the fisherman did not recognize the man on the shoreline until the man instructed him to throw his nets to a different side of the boat – and in exploring a totally different way of doing something and catching more fish than he could handle – he looked up and recognized the man as Jesus.

Speech. Touch. Taste.
Thinking.

Four different ways of Jesus revealing himself to his sheep.

Jesus was always adapting his voice and ways of connecting and sharing love with those around him. And yet we often struggle to do the same. The hope in that passage I think is that there is no one way that Jesus speaks to us and we can look for Jesus' voice in all kinds of ways and signs in our lives.

Our brilliant guide Alex was translating my sermon for me,

· Tanya Sadagopan, Georgian Baptist Bishop Says 'Being a Good Christian Isn't Enough,' *Parliament of the World's Religions* (Aug. 21, 2014), accessed on

sentence by sentence, as I spoke. So who knows what the people of Peace Cathedral actually heard that day – but something tells me – no matter what was lost in human translation – God's Spirit was translated without mishap or confusion.

The Peace Cathedral itself is a testimony to this idea of the Pentecost Phonetics of Fire. It is a Baptist church that continues to speak the language of the Orthodox church in its worship style (very high church – think incense and processions and lots of robes and traditional orthodox liturgy) and church structure (think bishops and priests and hierarchy) while also practicing the autonomy and freedom of expression and worship and belief that Baptists prize so highly...especially in terms of listening to the voices of the people.⁶

Bishop Malkhaz explains, "For the Baptist Church in Georgia we often have to find some analogies or stories to explain our identity. One such story goes like this: *"Once upon a time, in the forest a lion*

June 9, 2019 at <https://parliamentofreligions.org/content/georgian-baptist-bishop-says-being-good-christian-isnt-enough>.

*decided to have a convention. So he invited all the animals and birds for the convention. Once they came, he asked them to divide into two groups. Those who are beautiful should stay on the left and those who are strong should stay on the right. There was upheaval in the group and ultimately everybody found their place. In the midst there was an ugly frog. The lion asked, "Why did not you choose your place?" The frog said, "I do not know how to choose a place because I am both strong and beautiful."*⁷

"That is the story of the Evangelical Baptist Church in Georgia. [We don't fit into any preconceived box.] On one hand we are orthodox in our liturgy, in our theology, and in our ecclesiology. But on the other hand, we are strongly related to the European radical reformation. The church came into being about 140 years ago as a result of a search for meaning in the context where the Orthodox Church was a state church. There was longing to have a church to be closer to the people where the liturgy would be understandable for

the congregation. Our identity was forged in the time of persecution. We were first persecuted by the Czars and then persecuted by Communists and then we were persecuted by religious nationalists after the breakup of the Soviet Union."⁸

"So our identity has been forged in constant struggle with the culture which happened to be Russian Imperial, Soviet, and then Nationalist."

"Something that we learned in the course of the struggle is that it is very important to have equal rights and equal opportunity for everybody...[and that is why we are advocates for Jews and Muslims and other minority religious voices and for the LGBT community as well, which is highly persecuted here. And it's why we are advocates for women in leadership, as the women kept the Baptist church alive during the Soviet rule when men were being shipped off to Siberia by Stalin and killed.]"⁹

"Being a good Christian or a good Church isn't good enough

⁷ Sadagopan, *ibid.*
⁸ Sadagopan, *ibid.*

⁹ Sadagopan, *ibid.*

anymore. We must learn the ways of compassion.”¹⁰

It’s this understanding of compassion as a way to lead to courage that has led Georgian Baptists to keep their Orthodox style of worship and church hierarchical structure as Baptists. Why? Because, as Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili and Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze say, they knew that they had to speak the language of their people in order to be familiar enough to them that they would hear and listen to the gospel in a new light. This was especially true after so many years of persecution and Soviet control.

With 85% of the people in the Republic of Georgia as Eastern Orthodox...they knew they needed to keep consistent worship practices that would be welcoming and familiar in order to speak the bold message of the gospel in new ways in Georgia. It is truly a remarkable community and worship experience. The lead liturgist the day we were there was a young girl who sat the entire service because of differing physical ability. Children led the procession in to worship, hoisting the huge Bible up and

holding the incense for the Bishop. Lay people served communion and sang. All of the ministers on our trip (from different traditions) participated in the Eucharistic liturgy, which included prayers for Muslims and Jews and other religions around the table, and they asked a random guest who they had never met before to preach (me!). They are radically inclusive. And very much high church traditional Orthodox at the same time.

You could feel the Spirit of Pentecost in that Place...the Spirit of being open to how God is speaking and leading them today. Perhaps the best demonstration of the church community’s commitments, however, is its current endeavor to construct a mosque and a synagogue on their property, creating a spiritual home for Abrahamic faiths, including both Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. This is because the government (run by the Orthodox) is denying Jews and Muslims land for their religious buildings...so the Baptists at Peace Cathedral are giving up some of their land and buying other lands so these Jews and

¹⁰ Sadagopan, *ibid.*

Muslims have a place to worship.

In addition, they are building a library for children of all faiths – inspired by the life of Brad and Rita Berglund’s son, Brandon, and the supported by his memorial gifts after his death. I didn’t realize how important libraries are in a place like Georgia...but because they just got out from Soviet control in 1991, libraries are really sparse. Censorship was so strong that books and libraries were almost non-existent. And so, to have a library full of books for children will be a rare gift for the entire community and city.

You see, the Peace Cathedral holds deep appreciation for Eastern Orthodox Christianity – which birthed them...they recognize the gifts of their forefathers and mothers. They know their language of origin. And they realized that much has become corrupt when Orthodoxy became the state religion and priests began to hold on to power more than they were serving the people.

The Peace Cathedral isn’t perfect but they are figuring out how to speak the language of

their people while also speaking the gospel message of Christ’s love in a very specific and evangelical way. The Phonetics of Fire. I may never be able to make the sounds of the Georgian alphabet and language – (which is short on vowels...just listen to the name of this city!: Mtskheta), but I will continue to study and learn the phonetics of their spirituality and devotion of these Georgian Baptists. They are spreading the gospel by speaking new “languages” while preserving the traditional “language of origin” at the same time. Remarkable.

My pastor and mentor George Mason often says, *“God gives every church, at every moment, everything they need to be who God calls them to be.”* Peace Cathedral seems to embody this and believe this. Do we?

It seems that the disciples finally believe this on Pentecost.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor notes we can see that Jesus was the Messiah when we think about his followers in a kind of before-and-after set of pictures at Pentecost.

Before Pentecost the disciples didn't fully recognize who Jesus was, even though he ministered and lived with them for years. They didn't stick with him when he got into deep trouble with the authorities, instead abandoning him as quickly as they could. Then, when he, just as he had promised, rose from the dead, they struggled to fully believe that he was alive again.

On Pentecost, however, those very same slow, timid, bumbling disciples become utterly fearless and adaptable leaders. Jesus' disciples proclaim the gospel in front of both large crowds and menacing authorities. After Pentecost, they heal sick people and exorcise demons. Jesus' disciples even go to jail gladly where they sing hymns that shake their prison's foundations.¹¹

On Pentecost, Jesus' disciples don't just find their voices...they find a whole new way of speaking and being and proclaiming.

They say the best time to learn a new language is when we are

children. Perhaps the best time to learn a new way of speaking though, is after we have lived a little and seen how the limitations of our own speech keep us from connecting with others. Once we see that – we are free to begin again – to listen and learn something new – to find a new way to make our words sound – so that more can hear of God's good news and love.

Remember the Pentecost Phonetics of Fire. It is not speech that burns or dismisses. It is speech that invites and inspires. It may be confusing and hard to understand by some. And yet others will feel heard and included and accepted for the first time when you speak.

The Phonetics of Fire is not about pleasing everyone, but rather it is about speaking in a way that everyone has the opportunity to hear. Easier said than done, right?

Danielle Shroyer once said, "Without Pentecost, we'd just be people who tell Jesus' story.

¹¹ Doug Bratt, "Acts 2:1-21," *Center for Excellence in Preaching* (May 9, 2016), accessed on June 9, 2019 at

https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/day-of-pentecost-c/?type=old_testament_lectionary.

With Pentecost, we're people
who live into Jesus' story."¹²

Indeed. And yet, how we speak
IS how we live...so may we
speak in such a way that our
words invite people to the Way
of Christ.

The Spirit is falling on us
today...what language are we
speaking? What are your
Phonetics of Fire?

Amen.

¹² Quote found here on June 9, 2019:
<https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/pentecostc>.