

## "Hearing In Our Own Language"

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Pastor Larry Lineberger, Hope Lutheran Church

**Merry Christmas! Happy Easter! Powerful Pentecost?** What **do** we say? What is the appropriate Christian greeting for this, the third major festival of the Christian church year? Were you really counting the 50 days since Easter to know that this was Pentecost Sunday? Does it really feel to you like a major festival Sunday? I doubt it.

**Pentecost has never really captured the fancy of the contemporary church.** The Hallmark display of Pentecost cards is slim indeed, like non-existent. Christmas offers a shopping bonanza...what would Christmas be without gifts? Easter even captures the secular world with myths about a bunny and baskets of hard-boiled eggs and candy. Pentecost? Who out there beyond the world of Bible-believing Christians knows anything about the word Pentecost, much less the event and message of Pentecost?

Nevertheless, this day deserves our devout attention, our grateful, celebrative worship. The Lessons for this day really ought to rattle our dry bones ( Ezek. 37)and stir our hearts as we contemplate that **awesome moment** when the promised Spirit, the Comforter, fills the disciples, produces miraculous signs, and the powerful preaching of Peter become the vehicle for the launching of the Christian Church with the baptism of 3,000. **It really was awesome...** a truly proper use of that much over-used adjective. Nowadays we hear, "I got a good night's sleep" Response? *Awesome!* Really?

**You see, something happened on Pentecost...something remarkable and extraordinary...something to fill one with awe and wonder!**

A pastor named Thomas Long tells of teaching his small confirmation class of three girls about the Church Year. He asked them what they knew about Pentecost Sunday. He drew blank stares. So he launched into a discourse about the happenings of the day, the flames of fire, the foreign languages, the baptism of 3,000. Two of the girls listened passively... "boring"... but the third girl was astonished. With eyes like saucers she said, "*Gosh, Pastor Long, we must have been absent that Sunday.*" She obviously missed something...something like 2,000 years of church history. Indeed, something happened on Pentecost.

The truth is that many things happened, but I want to zero in one phrase, one concept, one very significant happening. Namely, **"the people heard the Gospel preached in their own language... and they were amazed."**

*"In their own language."* In a literal sense, of course, this has to do with various tongues, the variety of languages of that diverse community gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Yes, the Jews celebrated Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival. Some traditions say it was to celebrate the 50th day after their deliverance from Egypt, when they were gathered at Mt. Sinai and Moses delivered the Law from God. But the point is that thousands of pilgrims were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this Jewish Pentecost. There were Parthians, and Medes and Elamites, the people from Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Capadocia (the whole catalog of nations that lay readers hope they never have to pronounce). These untrained, Aramaic speaking, disciples were suddenly able to communicate with all those people in their own languages. Awesome! Really awesome!

It was a message that said that for a **moment the Lord in his mercy was withdrawing the curse of Babel.** You know the story in Gen. 11. The tower of Babel, the confusion of languages, symbol for the

divisions and hatreds and the arrogance of humanity. Babel spoke of confusion, man full of himself. Pentecost spoke of peace and power, man full of God! For in Peter's message of the crucified and risen Christ, there is hope, a real future for the human race. They heard the Gospel in their own language. It drew people together, helping them and us to understand that we are all lost, builders of our own Babel, lost in our self-centered, pride-filled pursuits, but made one and made whole in Christ Jesus. Indeed, what a happening. Awesome!

**Can we experience any of this today? Can we broaden the term "language" a bit and speak not of English or Spanish or German or whatever?** But rather speak of all our various needs and hurts and questions and burdens. Surely you understand that we all come to worship and hear the Word of the Gospel from **different points of reference**. It's as though we speak different languages. We don't understand each other. We have **generational barriers**, (the parent says to his teen, "*I just don't understand you*" and the teen says to the parent, "*you are so unreasonable.. I just don't understand you.*") We have **socio-economic barriers** (the poor man says to the rich man, "*You don't understand!*" and the rich man says to poor, "*You are so stupid, you don't understand!*") Do I need to talk about race? About education? About politics? You don't understand!

And we all **come to church, hoping to have our needs satisfied**, looking for direction and guidance. We want the preacher to speak our language...to understand our circumstances and help us deal with our particular burdens.

One comes looking for help in raising children in a frightening, diverse, immoral culture. Another might long to understand why she has to go through such a painful time, a dark night of the soul, filled with uncertainty, filled with fear about a marriage that seems to be crumbling, or filled with grief with the loss of a loved one, or filled with fear at a medical diagnosis. All these people are saying, "*Preacher, talk my language.. speak to my soul...heal my hurt.. fix my problem.*"

All too often the preacher gets caught up in that trap, giving directions, telling people what they should do or not do... how they should love a little more, give a little more, confess a little more. In short, telling people to do on their own what they are quite incapable of doing on their own. Offering prescriptions and admonitions that weigh us down rather than build us up. And the hearer begins to say, "*He's not talking my language! It's time to tune out. I don't get anything out of this. I've heard those lectures before.*"

**Is there a way to speak so that everyone can hear?** Is there a language that cuts through all the diversity, all the pain, all the hurt, and allows everyone to hear? Can the Spirit of God work this mighty deed among us? Is there a kind of universal language that will touch both mind and heart and transform our lives?

Well, this old preacher is bold enough to say, "*Yes, there is!*" First, there is a **universal malady, a universal dilemma**, which stands at the root of all our fears, all our hungers, all our needs... WE DO NOT FEAR AND LOVE AND TRUST GOD ABOVE ALL THINGS... and WE DO NOT LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS AS OURSELVES. Yes, it really is as simple, and as difficult as that. "*The soul that sins shall die!*" And we all die a thousand deaths, encountering insurmountable obstacles and crushing defeats, before we die. It's as simple and universal as that. We all live in a kind of self-made hell, dying in so many ways before we die.

And here is the real root of the problem. It is not simply that we do not love and trust Him above all things and do not love neighbor as self. WE CANNOT! It is beyond our capacity. Luther puts his finger on both the universal malady and the universal remedy when he declares that we are poor condemned

creatures who cannot live by God's laws and we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him.

I've said it to confirmation students and those attending adult classes for years. You can learn all the answers to the quizzes but you cannot learn to believe. You can learn about the faith, but you cannot learn faith. You can learn about trust, but cannot learn to trust.

And this is why we celebrate today. **This is the core of the Festival of Pentecost.** Those Jerusalem disciples were the first, but not the only ones to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. You have been so gifted! The Spirit of God has burst through all our human barriers, all our thousand little deaths, even the barrier of unbelief, to declare that there is a universal remedy. He has planted the seed of faith within our hearts, so that we know that God's love is stronger than every evil, stronger than all our doubts and fears, stronger than death itself. Awesome! God's love sent His Son into our broken world and raised the crucified Christ from the dead. God's love is the greatest power on the face of the earth. It is the catalytic agent that transforms every human experience, brings hope and confidence to every human predicament, and brings us from death to life. That is awesome!

When I speak of these things, declaring God's love for you, I don't have to worry that it may not be relevant to one age group or another, one socio-economic class or another. It is God's universal truth for the universal malady, and thru it the Spirit of God brings us to faith, enables us to trust, and binds us together in the family of God, the Church.

**Pentecost is a time of sending.** The disciples were sent out, to Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth. And so are we! Soon the "*worship is ended, and the service begins.*" But **Pentecost also reminds us that we have a home.** In this world we call that home the CHURCH. Like any good home, you are always welcome, unconditionally. Come as you are. Just as you are, without one plea, except that his blood was shed for thee. Like any good home, you can always get a good meal here. A meal like no place else. Bread and wine, real soul food. Here we speak a universal language... the language of confession and absolution, the language of grace and blessing. Here we are equipped for the tasks for which we are sent out. We gather in this place to scatter into our world to share his love. It is home. It is where the Spirit of God works mightily. It is where we hear spoken in our own language the mighty works of God. Don't ever get too far from home. Amen.