

Weekend of Sunday, May 20, 2018
Day of Pentecost/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: John 17:6-19
Sermon Title: “Do You Hear What I Hear?”

Theme

When speaking to his disciples before his death, Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as “the Helper” and described the difference the Spirit would make in their lives and in the world.

Text

[Jesus said,] ²⁶“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

²⁷You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

^{16:4b}“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

⁵But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

⁸And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Sermon

Want to know what I think would be fun? An old fashioned children's game of telephone. You know the game. I whisper something in one person's ear and they repeat what they think I said in the next person's ear and that repeats till everyone in the place has been whispered to and then the last person says what they heard, and inevitably by the time everyone gets a chance to hear and repeat, what I said initially is not at all what the last person says he or she heard.

But we don't really have to play that game at all for me to have that experience. Allow me to explain; probably once a month someone comes to me or writes me a follow-up email which says something like, "I felt like you were preaching right to me last weekend. You told me exactly what I needed to hear." And then sometimes they go on to tell me exactly what they heard me say. Now here is the amazing God moment – I never said what they heard me say!

When I first began preaching 25 years ago, this phenomena fascinated me, and often times I would ask follow-up questions. "What is it that you heard me say?" and "why do you think I was preaching just to you? I didn't even know you were going through that situation. What I really said was,"

It didn't take me long to begin to understand that what we were experiencing was the work of the Holy Spirit. Oh, as a lay person, I had heard of the Holy Spirit and had heard many sermons on it. I probably heard other pastors refer to unexplainable events and give credit to the Holy Spirit, but it became more real to me when I began to experience its power through me and my ministry.

I will say, it is tempting to get all full of myself. "Why thank you, yes I am a great preacher and yes, with my super-powers I am able to discern what is going on in your life. Why, I know what you are thinking at this very moment."

Sadly, I am so aware of my own lack of any super-powers that my first response in these situations has always been, just to smile and say, "It must be the work of the Holy Spirit." I don't even bother to tell them I never said what they heard me say. They heard what they heard, even if I never said it.

Again, same as last week's Gospel Reading, the setting for this week's Gospel Reading is the night of Jesus' betrayal. Jesus was sitting at Seder table celebrating the Passover, when he said those words I read to you a moment ago.

The disciples were just plain human beings, same as you and me. For years they had been walking with Jesus and observing his preaching and teaching and his performing signs and miracles. They even participated a little bit, now and then – even went on a couple of missionary trips without him and came back all excited for all the things they were able to do in his name. But I think it's pretty clear that even with their firsthand eye-witness experience of Jesus, they really didn't "get" him – do you know what I mean? There must have been times when they wondered, "Why are we following this guy around? What is the end game?"

But in the Gospel Reading for today Jesus said, 'Ya know, I've been telling you what my mission is all along. Just not as clearly as I am now, and that is because you couldn't have understood it then. But now you need to pay attention.' And he went on telling them what was about to happen to him in the clearest way yet.

And he told them another thing that I don't think they really understood in the moment. 'I am sending you the Advocate who will give you the words to say, remind you of all the lessons I taught you, and guide you in the actions I want you to take. Just be open to hearing it and being used by it.' And then he left that upper room and gave himself for the sins of the world.

What happened to the disciples? I am so glad you asked.

It's quite a dramatic story. After the Resurrection, Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem until the coming of the promised Advocate, which Luke, the author of Acts, called the Holy Spirit. During the fifty days between the Resurrection and the Day of Pentecost, Jesus appeared among them several times. I am guessing that they took the opportunity to fill in the theological gaps in their understanding of him and his ministry. Then he ascended. Tradition says the Ascension took place forty days after the Resurrection. The disciples, now apostles, replaced Judas with Matthias. And devoted themselves to prayer.

Then, as you heard in the First Reading from Acts, as they were all gathered together in one place, there came from heaven ^{2:1}"a sound like the rush of a violent

wind.” And not just the apostles heard it. Luke wrote that ⁶“at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered.”

³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now listen carefully to the next verse:

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one *heard* them speaking in the native language of each.

Now I emphasized the word, *heard* in that illustration of the text because I had one of those encounters with the Holy Spirit this week while preparing this sermon. Like that telephone game, I am guilty of hearing what I’ve heard all my life. You see, we mainline protestants have Pentecostal envy when it comes to speaking in tongues. I think we secretly wish God would give Lutherans the ability to speak in tongues because the Evangelicals tell us that speaking in tongues is the litmus test for being “born again” and receiving the Holy Spirit. And they point to this text and others as their proof. But speaking in the native tongues of the Jews gathered in Jerusalem from all over the known world for the festival of the Pentecost is not the amazing thing here, and I never saw it until this week.

The thing that was so powerful was *not* that the apostles could speak in the languages of all the devout Jews gathered in Jerusalem. The thing that was and *remains* so powerful is that the Holy Spirit gave the devout Jews gathered in Jerusalem the ability to *hear* the Gospel in the native language of each.

Did you hear what I just said? Do I need to repeat myself?

Whoa! When I read that it was like I had just read Acts 2 for the first time, I underlined it!

Now some of you may be sitting there, listening about half way – kinda like the disciples often did with Jesus, and now you are wondering why I am expressing so much excitement and asking yourself, ²“What does this mean?”

²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “*What does this mean?*”

I’m so glad you asked. My explanation is my Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

What I myself experienced is not unlike that telephone game. I’ve read and heard read these texts hundreds of times and yet, my brain interpreted what it really says into something I thought it said.

But in the same way that the Holy Spirit allows you to hear something in the sermon I never really said, this week the Holy Spirit allowed me to read and see something that was always there but I never saw.

So it could be argued that the real miracle of Pentecost was not that the apostles spoke in the tongues of many nations, but that the hearers heard the gospel in their own native language.

What does this mean for you and for the rest of the world? I am so glad you asked.

I am eternally thankful that whatever success I have had in ministry has little to do with my superior intellect, my brilliant and acclaimed preaching, or my handsome good looks and witty sense of humor. As true as all that may be, the real power of everything I say and do is the gift of the Holy Spirit. And especially when it comes to what I say, the important thing is what you hear – which may be something else altogether.

Do you hear what I hear? Maybe. Maybe not. It’s up to the Holy Spirit.

And the gift of the Holy Spirit is not uniquely mine. At my baptism *and yours* words like this were said in prayer over us:

Pour out your Holy Spirit, the power of your living Word, that those who are washed with the waters of baptism maybe given new life.

The Holy Spirit *has* been given to all of you who have been baptized into Christ – and as a point of clarification, the Holy Spirit doesn’t even wait for baptism.

This weekend, Brian and Kathy Wolf will join our fellowship. No big deal; they have been attending Zion since before I came here. They have been faithful members of Christ' church their whole lives.

And on Sunday morning and Sunday evening we will celebrate the confirmation of faith of 24 of our young members, and then again on Sunday evening with over 32 young folks from Trumbull and Mahoning County at the Eastern Conference Service of Confirmation.

In the prayer of Affirmation of Baptism, we say,

Stir up in them the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of Joy in your presence, both now and forever.

You see, the gift of the Holy Spirit is already yours. God's word is living. It allows us to hear it fresh and new every time we read it or hear it. And that is the way it is when we repeat it to too, if we would but trust the Holy Spirit to use us.

- But we fear we don't have the right words to say.
- People will reject us or make fun of us for believing such a thing.

Well that my friends is not allowing the Holy Spirit to work through you. And it's not about you anyway. What is heard is the responsibility of the Holy Spirit.

So finally, pray that the Holy Spirit reaches you in new and inspiring ways so that you may be used by it for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that brings life now, and in the age to come.

Prayer

We give you thanks, O God, that through water and the Holy Spirit you give us new birth, cleanse us from sin, and raise us to eternal life. Stir up in us the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of Joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen