

“Ability in the Spirit”

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Pentecost

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Text: Acts 2:4

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“As the Spirit gave them ability.”

That brief phrase at the end of Acts 2:4 captures the heart of Pentecost.

On that first Pentecost, people began speaking in languages others could understand because of a gift of the Spirit — the gift not merely of speech, but of understanding. Pentecost began with differences and it ended not with sameness, but with a shared sense of mission. Pentecost is not about the erasure of difference; it is about the transformation of difference into richness. The church is not a factory producing identical parts. It is a tapestry woven from many colors and many threads.

In last week’s adult class, we talked about poetry, and how much of the Bible is made up of poetry. About a third of the Bible is poetry, and there are some books, such as Psalms and the Song of Solomon, that are nothing but poetry. Poetry is found throughout Scripture, including Paul’s letters, which is why we were discussing it. Paul quotes a famous poem about Jesus when he wrote to the Philippians (2:5-11):

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he existed in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
assuming human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself

and became obedient even to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God has exalted him even more highly,
and gave him the name
above all others.

So that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

When that passage is read in church, rarely is it read as poetry, with the pauses, the inflections, and the nuances that poetry asks of us if we are to hear it as it longs to be heard. And rarely does anyone say that that poem does not mean that the whole world will someday be Christian. But that's another sermon for another day.

Today is about communication, and there are lots of ways to communicate, and as I get older, I find that poetry is becoming one of the more meaningful ways for me, a gift I credit to a Writers' Circle I was once a part of, whose monthly writing sessions usually began with a poem, often by Mary Oliver.

Those of us who were privileged to attend Carolyn Vrtunski's memorial service in this space a few days ago heard one of Oliver's poems—"In Blackwater Woods"---read by Carolyn's grandson, Alex:

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of light,

are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon

and fulfillment,

the long tapers

of cattails

are bursting and floating away over

the blue shoulders

of the ponds,

and every pond,

no matter what its

name is, is

nameless now.

Every year

everything

I have ever learned

in my lifetime

leads back to this: the fires

and the black river of loss

whose other side

is salvation,

whose meaning

none of us will ever know.

To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to let it go,

to let it go.

It was pretty obvious to those of us in the room at the time why Carolyn's family chose that particular poem to be read at her departing, but what is less obvious is why that poem—or any poem—speaks to any of us with a power lacking in prose.

Is it the image of trees “turning their own bodies into pillars of light”?

Is it the evocative “fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment,” as though any of us knows what fulfillment smells like? Mary Oliver apparently did and she chose—probably felt compelled—to share that awareness with the rest of us in the great gift of her poetry.

It doesn't matter if we have to linger for a time—perhaps a long time—over the question of what a tree's fulfillment may smell like. The image draws us close and asks us to pause, to give it a moment of our “one wild and precious life,” to quote another line from Mary Oliver, perhaps her most famous words. Beauty takes time, and perhaps that's what poetry does that prose does not do: it infuses words with beauty in a way that allows for a different kind of communicating and a different kind of understanding.

That matters in 2026.

We are living in a time when communication technologies have never been more advanced and yet genuine understanding has perhaps never been more fragile.

We carry in our pockets devices capable of connecting us instantly to people around the globe, yet many of us feel more isolated, suspicious, and divided than ever.

We inhabit customized worlds of algorithms and curated feeds that show us what we already agree with and shield us from voices that puzzle, perplex, or challenge us. Increasingly, we hear only what confirms our fears, flatters our assumptions, or reinforces our tribal identities in the worst ways.

Pentecost speaks directly into that crisis of communication and understanding. The Holy Spirit reverses that damage we did to our ability to communicate when we gave free rein to our egos at the Tower of Babel.

On Pentecost, the Spirit does not erase linguistic differences. The miracle is not that everyone suddenly speaks the same, artificial language.

The miracle is that each person hears about “God’s deeds of power” in ways that made those deeds accessible and meaningful and transformative—for them, the hearer.

Those unlettered Galileans who were Jesus’ first followers, received from God’s Spirit the gift of speaking so that others from the entire known world at the time might hear not what **they** had to say but rather what great things **God** had done. The content did not belong to the speakers, it belonged to God. Only the form—this language or that one, as each hearer needed—belonged to the speakers.

That’s the way we are intended to speak—not as we wish to say, but rather as others need to hear.

Perhaps that’s the secret knowledge that poets possess: that there are others in the world who need to hear that trees can turn themselves into pillars of light and give off a fragrance of fulfillment. The poet doesn’t know the how or why of that need, and the poet doesn’t need to. The poetry—the offering of words—is enough.

And the gift of needed speech isn’t limited to poets.

I was listening to an interview the other day with the writer, Kate DiCamillo. Those of you who read to your children or grandchildren may recognize her name, since she’s

written over 25 novels for children, including *Because of Winn-Dixie*, *The Tale of Despereaux*, and *Flora and Ulysses*. She's also won the prestigious Newbery Medal for children's literature twice.

In the course of this interview, DiCamillo recounted how a little boy of eight or nine approached her after one of her talks and said that because she had told her audience how she had survived as a sickly child living with her mother in Florida while her mentally unstable father remained in Philadelphia and that things had turned out okay, this little boy, too, knew that he would be okay even though he was living in South Dakota with his mother and his father was living in California.

By sharing parts of her own life story that some people would prefer to keep concealed, DiCamillo had created a space—a sacred, precious, tender space—where a vulnerable child could enter psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually.

That's what the best writers for children do, and all of us, no matter what our age, carry with us the spirit of the vulnerable eight-year-old that we all once were. And that vulnerable human spirit needs and deserves the kind of sacred space the best speakers and writers provide.

In a culture of increasing coarseness, vulgarity, and mendacity, genuine communication feels more and more like a miracle because speaking truthfully and listening generously requires humility. And humility, as a civic as well as private virtue, was placed on the chopping block in the run-up to the election of 1980. Humility requires us to suspend, however briefly, the ego's constant demand to defend itself. Most of us do not actually listen in order to understand. We listen while preparing our rebuttal. We listen selectively. We hear what we want to hear.

I remember years ago, during my brief stint teaching high school, coming frighteningly close to a physical altercation with a student. I had given him instructions, but he exploited an ambiguity in my wording to do what he wanted. He heard what suited him because he wanted permission for something he already intended to do. What followed was less a conversation than a collision of wills. Neither of us was truly listening.

That same dynamic unfolds in hospital rooms every day. Physicians deliver difficult news, but patients and families often absorb only the hopeful fragments while unconsciously filtering out the painful realities. When the difficult outcome finally comes, there is shock and bewilderment. We hear what our fears and desires permit us to hear.

We see the same phenomenon in public life. Scandals rarely emerge because nobody noticed warning signs. More often, people **ignored** the warning signs because they

threatened profits, reputations, or comforting illusions. Human beings have always been remarkably skilled at selective listening.

Which is why Pentecost matters so much.

The Spirit creates not merely speech but receptivity. The Spirit gives the ability to hear truthfully. And hearing truthfully is one of the hardest spiritual disciplines there is.

That is why wise leadership—in churches, communities, and nations—depends upon listening to voices different from our own. Beneath the old political saying “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” lies an important insight: if we talk only with and hear only from people who already agree with us, our perception of reality shrinks and our judgment deteriorates. There is often more than one way to be right, and wisdom usually emerges through the patient engagement of multiple perspectives.

And that’s why the next pastoral leader of this church will be chosen not by a bishop or a district superintendent or a general presbyter, but by a committee of the whole—the whole congregation of Forest Hill Church. Many potential candidates will be vetted by the Pastor Nominating Committee, but the finalist they propose will be voted on by the entire congregation, at a meeting called for that purpose, where every member has both voice and vote.

To get us from today to then will require of the PNC a great deal of speaking and listening in various ways, and so I want to close by bidding your prayers, again, for the members of that committee, who are so deeply needful of the Spirit’s Pentecostal power. Let me remind you, by speaking their names, that they are persons bearing within themselves the spirits of vulnerable eight-year-olds deserving of attention and care:

- Chris Bell
- Bader (bed-er) Boland
- Antoinette Franklin
- Kurt Haas
- Katie Hall
- Rayba Johnson
- Chiq Montgomery
- Dean Sieck
- Mark Wedell
- Peg Weissbrod.

Pentecost is considered the birth of the church. This church is experiencing a rebirth as it goes through the process of seeking new pastoral leadership. The outcome will be important, of course, but the process of getting from where you were in August of 2024

to wherever you will be when your new pastor is installed is just as important. To speak and to listen graciously, generously, truthfully, insightfully, and compassionately is demanding and holy and revealing work; it is also one of life's great privileges. To bring to a pivotal conversation the heart of a poet or a children's author—or the mind of an engineer or a lawyer or a nurse practitioner—is a gift and a treasure. We all have those gifts and the Spirit is waiting for us to offer them in service and in love.