

A Spirit Of Listening and Understanding

Acts 2:1-17

Pentecost - The 50th day, Greek term for the Jewish festival of Weeks,
5 days after ceremony of the Barley Sheaf during Passover.
Marked the beginning of the offering of first fruits.

Acts 2:1-17

When the day of Pentecost had come,
they were all together in one place.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound
like the rush of a violent wind,
and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,
and a tongue rested on each of them.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak
in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven
living in Jerusalem.

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered,
because each one heard them speaking
in the native language of each.

Amazed and astonished, they asked,

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?

And how is it that we hear,

each of us, in our own native language?

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya
belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome,

both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs

— in our own languages we hear them speaking about
God’s deeds of power.”

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

But others sneered and said,
“They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven,
raised his voice and addressed them,
“People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem,
let this be known to you,
and listen to what I say.

Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose,
for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your daughters and your sons shall prophesy,
and your young shall see visions,
and your old shall dream dreams.

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Acts 2:1-21

June 8, 2025

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I.

We are going to do something a little different today: *I* am going to stray, and *you* are going to strain. I'll go first. Strictly speaking, preaching is understood not only as the interpretation of, and expounding on, an *historical* document, but one which is also a *living* document with an application to our present reality. I have spent over 30 years interpreting and expounding on this very important historical document, and on the story of Pentecost in specific. Today, however, I'm going to ask us to take a little break from it; if only to mix things up a little bit and change our perspective on the familiar. I am going to be right up front with you, though, in admitting to the cardinal sin of preaching (or homiletics): I'm going to *stray* from the text.

II.

There are really two things happening at Pentecost. The first is, that on this occasion the world receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. Though we take it as matter-of-fact, recognize that this was an *extremely* significant and very *unusual* thing owing to Christianity growing out of the strictly monotheistic Judaic tradition. The Jews were expecting a Messiah, so although this Jesus was admittedly a bit less grandiose than the one for which they had long hoped, which made believing in him something of a stretch for many folks, it was still within the realm of their imagination and expectation. However, this Holy Spirit thing, the "Paraclete" in the Greek, understood to be the "helper" or "advocate," was *completely* outside of the box.

III.

In the span of about 30 years, a 2000 year old tradition was being asked to go from a staunchly preserved and hard-fought stance as the world's *only* monotheistic religion, to accepting a lowly carpenter, crucified on a cross, as a Messiah; *and*, on top of that, now being asked to believe in some kind of weird, ethereal, Holy Spirit, which rested on people as tongues of fire. Suffice to say that this was too tall of an order for most.

The real kicker, however, is the second thing that happened at Pentecost: the Holy Spirit, *whatever* it is, apparently had a very real effect on people. So much so, that folks who were filled *with* it (not full *of* it) seemed to be able to speak in a variety of languages they had never before known.

IV.

This was all pretty weird, actually, but in a strange way it made perfect sense, as the “Jesus Movement” was about to embark on a huge period of rapid expansion made possible through evangelism to the entire known world. What better way to accomplish this, than by have the ability to speak the native languages of what the Jews called, “The Nations.” This then is the text, and now I’m going to stray from it.

As a disclaimer, what I’m about to propose to you is sheer fiction. I am making it all up, there is absolutely no scriptural basis for it. However, I stray willingly, and with a full awareness of my transgression, under the guise of a most liberal interpretation of the homiletical rules in the hope of applying this living text to our present reality.

V.

There are two gifts given at Pentecost. The first gift is the Spirit itself. The second gift, made possible by the first, is this ability to speak in other languages. However, what if (and this is a big “what if”) this second gift wasn’t the ability to *speak*, but, rather, the ability to *listen* and *understand*?

I have often thought that the Pentecost story told of the Spirit giving a rather small gift wrapped as a very impressive package. It was showy, startling, and surreal. It certainly got everyone’s attention, what with all the tongues of fire dancing here and there on everyone. Nevertheless, beyond this initial event the rest of the biblical narrative rarely even mentions such a gift (more often as divisive, or a lesser gift) and there is certainly no mention of it being in anyway instrumental in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ or in helping to found the nascent church beyond the bounds of Palestine.

VI.

Yes, it was an awesome demonstration of power, and yes it equipped a few people with the language they would need to travel to such foreign lands and

preach the Gospel. For the most part, though, this second gift received on Pentecost really didn't have all that much of an impact on the big picture. In fact, one could argue that, really, it was something of a failure in that it took the Apostle Paul, who did *not* receive the gift of being able to speak in other languages, to take the church and the Gospel that next step out into the larger world.

So, whereas the gift of the Holy Spirit, that aspect of God sent to comfort, sustain, guide, teach, remind, and reveal was a *huge* boon to the faithful and to the church, the gift to just a few folk of being able to speak other languages was, it would seem, something of a blip on the radar.

VII.

Now, I don't want to come off as ungrateful, and God certainly knows the whys and wherefores of what God decides to do, but I can tell you a far better gift for the Holy Spirit to give the church would be the ability to listen and understand others as they speak in *their* native language and of their own experience using their own words. In fact, nothing would be of greater value to the church than the gift of listening and understanding.

There is no one *definitive* theory of listening, but there is one in particular which I find to be very illuminative: IPSAE. IPSAE, which is an acronym, maintains that there are 5 levels of listening: **I**gnoring, **P**retend Listening, **S**elective Listening, **A**ttentive Listening & **E**mpathetic Listening. Ignoring is just that, we hear, but we chose not to listen; we turn away. Pretend Listening is acknowledging you *hear* what is being said, but you just pretend to actually be listening.

VIII.

Selective Listening is paying attention only to that which *you* decide is important or matters to you. Attentive Listening, also known as Active Listening, is putting energy forth, and your concerns aside, in order to fully listen and understand what another is saying to you. Empathic Listening is being moved by that to which you have listened and understood such that you are *changed* by it and become *connected* to or *part of it* in some way.

For better or worse, ignoring is something we all do all the time. Either we don't have the time or energy to listen, or we're afraid to listen because what is being said is too vast to do anything about, and too much to even contemplate.

IX.

A few years ago, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, a United Nations committee, released a report written by 145 experts from 50 countries stating that one million of the planet's eight million species are threatened with extinction by human action and inaction. I mean, what does one *do* with that? When it hurts too much to hear, we ignore.

Though Pretend Listening is commonplace, teenagers and politicians really excel at doing so. "*Clean up your room.*" "*Ok, mom.*" "*I'm here to listen to my constituents.*" Whenever someone says, "*I hear you*" you can be pretty confident that they don't, and are only pretending to listen.

Selective Listening is predetermining what will mesh with *our* view of the world, or give us what we think or believe will be of direct benefit to us; it feeds our narrative. Consider the news, we go to those sources which tell us what we *want* to hear.

X.

Now, these first three levels of listening, Ignoring, Pretending and Selecting, are things we all must do to survive. We live in a data driven world with far too many voices shouting at us and way too much information to digest. Filtering out most of it is a survival technique just to get on with our day, and our lives. However, if we really want to thrive in life, we need to learn to push past these first three and strain to listen in a way which is, at the very least, active, if not empathetic.

This is exactly what I'm asking us to do today; that we *strain* to listen to each other. I concede that it is no easy task. It requires great concentration and effort to actively listen to another person. It is a practice, a discipline, to keep our minds from wandering, to hold ourselves back from interrupting, giving advice, trying to fix, or interjecting our own related experience. Few of us are born with the ability to actively and attentively listen to others; it is something we must *cultivate* in ourselves. And, a *church* is a great place to do so.

XI.

When I first set out to write this sermon, the title was “A Spirit of Listening. By the time I was done, I had to go back and add “and Understanding.” I think the last level of listening, Empathetic Listening, is what, finally, gives us understanding. When I was a kid, my grandmother lived directly in back of us, with an actual sidewalk between the 2 houses. I was over at my Gram’s house all the time, thousands of times over the years. And, every time I would enter I would see this little sign which hung on the foyer wall. I don’t know what happened to it, and I honestly can’t remember all the words, but I well remember the admonish to walk a mile in another’s moccasins. Perhaps not the most sensitive language, but it sure instilled in me a sensitivity to the circumstances of other people’s lives; an awareness of *their* story, *their* experiences, and an empathy for the words which arose from them. A church, at its best, is walking in each other’s shoes.

XII.

I began today by making the claim that more than just an historical document, the Bible is also a *living* document. Though it doesn’t necessarily change, how we understand it must; even if that means straying from it a little bit every now and then. Just as we strain to listen and understand others, we must strain to listen and understand what this living document might be saying to us in this day and this age. There was a time when having the ability to speak the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ was of paramount importance to the early church.

Now, 2000 years later, that same Gospel invites us to also have a spirit of listening and understanding. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit that remains largely unopened. Nonetheless, with each step we take in each other’s shoes, we open it a little more each day. Amen.