

**Today: Translating the Gospel****Text: Acts 2:1-13**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, May 31, 2009 (Pentecost Sunday)  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

My barber, Jack Segro, is still hearing from those of you who are his customers that he let me down on Easter. For those who don't hear me preach on Easter, Jack usually gives me an opening story for my Easter sermon, but this year he didn't come up with anything. So he has been trying to make up for it in the last seven weeks, and I think he finally came through. The story he sent falls in the category of how dangerous it can be to take for granted what people hear and don't hear; what they know and what they don't know.

A man asked his wife, "If you could have anything in the world for one day, what would you want?" "I'd love to be six again," she replied. So on the morning of her birthday, her husband got her up bright and early and off they went to a local theme park. What a day! He put her on every ride in the park: the Death Slide, the Screaming Loop, and the Wall of Fear; everything there was! Wow!

Five hours later she staggered out of the theme park, her head reeling and her stomach upside down. Right to a McDonald's they went, where her husband ordered her a Big Mac along with extra fries and a refreshing chocolate shake. Then it was off to see the latest episode of Star Trek, complete with popcorn, Pepsi-Cola and Milk Duds. What a fabulous adventure!

Finally she wobbled home with her husband and collapsed into bed. He leaned over and lovingly asked, "Well, dear, what was it like being six again?"

One eye opened. "You idiot, I meant my dress size." It is always a dangerous thing to take for granted what people hear and don't hear; what they know and what they don't know.

This morning I don't want to assume that all of you know what we are talking about when we say we are celebrating Pentecost. For some of you, this is your first Pentecost in the church, and it never hurts to remind all of us about the significance of the day.

Pentecost is actually a Jewish holiday associated with the harvest. On Passover, the first omer of barley was offered to God in gratitude for the giving of the Law to Moses. Seven weeks later two loaves of bread were offered in thanksgiving for the harvest of the crop that had been planted fifty days earlier.

Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the surrounding countryside to celebrate this very traditional festival. The city was like Times Square on New Year's Eve. People from all over the known world were there and in a festive mood. Maybe that explains why some people thought the disciples were drunk when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and spoke in languages that they neither knew nor understood about the saving love of God in Jesus Christ.

For Christians, Pentecost is not a harvest festival, but a sacred day of another sort. It is the day that God chose to give the church the power to witness. For nearly seven weeks after the death of Jesus, the disciples had not been very visible. Their leader was dead, and they were disheartened. As we found out last week, they had pinned both their spiritual hopes and their political aspirations on Jesus, and both their hopes and their aspirations died with Jesus on what we know as Good Friday.

The Bible tells us that there were about 120 disciples of Jesus gathered together to celebrate their Jewish festival when suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. It doesn't say that the wind blew, but that there was this noise like a tornado that filled the room where they were gathered, and just as suddenly as the sound came the symbol of the presence of God: fire. Divided tongues like fire appeared over their heads, and they found themselves speaking in languages that those listening to them could understand.

There is a lot that could be said about Pentecost. We could talk about the liturgical color of Pentecost (red) which is symbolic of the tongues of fire which rested over the heads of the disciples. We could talk about it being the church's birthday; the day when the church became the church which is why we have balloons. We could and we have talked about the excitement and the enthusiasm that the Spirit gave to the disciples; an excitement and enthusiasm which are not always seen among Presbyterians which has given us the nickname of God's "frozen

chosen.” We could and we have talked about evangelism; how 3,000 people responded to the message which Peter preached at Pentecost. This morning I would like to talk to you about the gift of the Spirit to translate the gospel into languages people can understand.

Our involvement as a church with Kenya, Honduras and our Hispanic Fellowship at Resurrection Chapel has made me aware of how limited I am in languages. I only speak one language with any proficiency, and that language is English. Our trips to Kenya have taught me some words in Swahili. Our involvement with Honduras and Resurrection Chapel has revived some of my high school and college Spanish. However, I am not an effective witness to the love of God in either of those languages. I just don’t speak them well enough. Yet I have become aware that not speaking another language does not let me off the hook of using the gift of the Spirit to translate the Gospel into a language that others can understand. Allow me to explain.

One of the joys of being part of a diverse staff here at First Presbyterian is also one of its challenges. Don Hackett and Dan Snyder are much more comfortable sharing the Gospel with strangers than I am. I have witnessed both of them in settings where I would have remained silent about God’s love for an individual when they did not hesitate to speak, and it has challenged me to think about opportunities I am missing because of my reticence to share this part of my life. Let me give you an example.

During our Lenten series on healing, I became much more aware of the emotional and physical pain some of the people I encounter on a daily basis were going through. I buy my coffee every day from the same Turkey Hill, and for years the same staff has served me. They know I am a regular customer, and we joke with one another with ease. These are young adults, pierced and tattooed; with whom I felt I had little to offer because we live in such different worlds.

Then one day, as I was joking with one of the young women, I asked her about her wedding. She had received a ring from her fiancé a couple of years ago which was a big deal at the time, and she was to be married this summer. As I asked her about the wedding, tears welled up in her eyes. *“We broke off our engagement a few weeks ago,” she said.* I asked her how she

was doing, and her reply was, *“I feel like life has lost its meaning.”*

It didn't go much further than that on that particular day, but as the weeks went on we had several other conversations about the meaning and purpose of life. She knows I am a pastor, and she wanted to know why God would allow this to happen to her.

During Holy Week I asked her where she was going to go to church on Easter. She replied, *“I don't do church.”* And I said to her, *“That's too bad because if you did do church I think there are a lot of people like you who are trying to discover the meaning and purpose in their lives from the story we tell on Easter of God's love for all human beings; that God loved the world so much that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* We talked about that for a while, and she asked what time Easter services were, and I wrote them on the back of one of my cards and invited her to come.

Now mind you, she did not make it to church on Easter, but that conversation has changed our relationship, and I am praying that one Sunday morning I will see her right here so she can be surrounded by the love which most people experience when they make it through our doors. What I did was out of character for me, but what I learned was that when the Gospel is shared in the context of a relationship, it gets translated into a language the other person can understand. I made the effort because I wanted to speak to her in a language she could understand.

God has been working on me a long time to understand this message. The gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was not to give the disciples a message that they could preach. It was to give them a language which they did not know so they could enter into a relationship with people who did not know God.

Years ago while serving in Jenkintown, PA, I had a part-time Parish Associate for Evangelism on my staff that embodied this understanding of the work of the spirit in her life. Her name is Anita Bell.

A woman who lived down the street from Anita died an untimely death leaving behind three small children and a husband who had to continue making his living as a plumber. It was

summer, and the children were not in school. Anita took the responsibility for organizing child care for them in five different homes in the neighborhood. She, herself, took the children on Fridays providing them with a loving, well-supervised environment in their own neighborhood.

Eventually that man wanted to know what prompted Anita to do what she had done for him. It was then that Anita had the opportunity to tell him about the God whom she loved; whom she believed had wept with them at the loss of his wife and the mother of her children; and who had called Anita to provide some of the love they needed as they grieved her loss.

Anita Bell found a language that this man could understand to share with them the good news of God's love. I don't know if the man ever responded, but that is not the point. Speaking in a language that someone else can understand is a gift of the Spirit. It is given so that the love of God can be shared with others in a way they can understand, and we leave the conversion of those who hear us in the hands of God.

This is the gift of the Spirit: to translate the Gospel into a language those who are hearing you can understand. The Pentecost question is this: Have you experienced it yet? Are you willing to ask for it so you can?