

## “Holding Our Tongues”

Acts 2:1-21  
May 31, 2009

The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke  
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

### Pentecost

*Prayer: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us and upon our hearing of this familiar ancient text. Teach us what we need to know and show us what we need to do in order to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I'm struck by the contrast in the two lessons this morning. In Genesis the people all spoke the same language. There was general harmony allowing the people to work together in building that tower that reached toward the heavens. And yet God came down and in the midst of that harmony deliberately mixed up the language in order to confuse the people. On the surface, it doesn't make any sense. Why would God do such a thing? Doesn't God want unity?

The real question might be, however, that while the people were all speaking the same language and working toward the same goal, what was that goal to which they were working? The answer in the Genesis story was to attain the level of God. In other words, their unified endeavors were for the sake of fulfilling their rather self-indulgent, grandiose aspirations.

So, according to the story, God mixed up their common language forcing people to scatter and struggle with their differences and with their relationships with one another. Which means that just maybe, the overarching message in this text, especially as it relates to the Pentecost account in Acts, is that God wants unity but not uniformity—that diversity is better and healthier in that too much uniformity is likely to find itself without perspective and headed in the wrong direction.

In a book by entitled *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776*, historian Jon Butler contends that revolutions don't just happen but are the result of changing social, political and cultural circumstances over a period of time. He also argues that by 1770, America had become the first modern society in the world. During the first six decades of the seventeenth century, there was very little ethnic diversity among the tens of thousands of immigrants who arrived in the New World, with about ninety percent of them being English. In the seven or so decades of the eighteenth century and leading up to the Revolution, all of that changed.

In fact in 1690, there were fewer than two hundred thousand Europeans living here and by 1770 there were more than two million. In other words, in 1700 there was only one colonist for every twenty inhabitants of Britain and Ireland combined. By 1770, that ratio had become one in five. That growth was not only a result of natural reproduction but also of the mass immigration of a wide variety of Europeans, most of whom were no longer English—a notion CNN's Lou Dobbs would no doubt find frightening! But the

seeds were sown early on for this country to occupy its unique place in the world in terms of its diversity, its openness and its willingness to accommodate others.

The very name of this church was an attempt to reach out to immigrants who had just arrived and who were in desperate need of a House of Hope—a kind of anchor to root them in the new world. And remember, the immigrants who arrived in St. Paul were not the most desirable. They were by and large unskilled and uneducated.

So, could it be that what is being celebrated on the day of Pentecost as all those people from all those different places, each with a different language and yet miraculously understanding one another, is nothing other than the beauty and richness of God's wonderfully diverse creation, which always requires the presence and power of the Spirit to fully appreciate.

I say it takes the presence of the Spirit because you know as well as I do that even tolerance, let alone an appreciation of diversity, is never easily or naturally achieved. This is especially true when it comes to religion as the landscape is increasingly diverse and complex.

Last Sunday, more Christians attended worship in China than in all of Europe. Today, in England and France, the congregations with the largest worship attendance were black congregations. Today, more Anglicans have attended worship in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Episcopalians in the United States combined.

Today, more Presbyterians went to church in Gahanna than in Scotland.

Looking here, as the world's richest and most highly educated country, we are also the most religious. Nearly two-thirds of Americans say that religion is important to them and close to half say they attend a worship service at least once a week. In all, there are more churches, synagogues, temples and mosques in this country, per capita, than anywhere else in the world—one for about every 865 people (*U.S. News & World Report*, 5-6-02).

We are by far the most religiously diverse nation on the planet and becoming more so all the time. Since the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated quotas related to national origin, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and others have been arriving here in increasing numbers dramatically altering the religious landscape of this country.

Did you know there are more Buddhists in this country than Presbyterians? And there are as many Muslims as there are Jews. The one thing that is certain is that no one is certain how it will all turn out. Lord knows we haven't always dealt with our country's racial ethnic diversity in good and healthy ways. In fact we've gotten in horribly wrong on a number of occasions. But no nation has ever done anything close to what is being asked of this nation, namely the acceptance of diversity on this extraordinary scale. How we handle it as a nation is extremely important because the world is watching. And how

we respond as Christians to our ever increasing religious diversity is perhaps even more important.

One of the central debates in the study of the sociology of religion is whether increasing religious pluralism enhances or diminishes one's religion. Some argue that increasing religious pluralism leads to greater secularization and indifference—a watering down of what people once held as true and authoritative. Others contend just the opposite, arguing that competition is always a good thing and that religious monopolies have a tendency to become lazy, out of touch and irrelevant.

I read somewhere recently that most Americans, three in four actually, believe that all religions contain at least some element of truth in them. And the caution I would offer up isn't that Americans don't believe anything, it's that we're inclined to believe everything.

So on this Pentecost Sunday let me ask you: what does it mean to be a Christian in today's complex, multicultural, religiously diverse society?

Regrettably, too much time and energy is spent, not to mention attention given, to people who loudly proclaim themselves to be Christian by determining and pronouncing who is not. Who is in and who is out—who has a right to claim the kingdom and who doesn't. That's an approach similar to placing yourself on a pedestal, or at least a tower high enough that you think you've reached the mind of God and from which you look down and judge everyone who is "beneath" you.

As a Christian, the reality is I can only speak about that which I know to be true in my life and in the lives of others who share my convictions. That for me, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. And my faith is not threatened in the least by what others believe.

I remember the first time I was frightened in church. I've been frightened in church many times in my life for other reasons, but I remember the first time. I must have been about eight or nine years old, listening to our minister in whatever state of listening young people engage in. As a preacher, he could be kind of a shouter. He had a loud booming voice and was known to thunder away with his no nonsense authority. One Sunday he was in the pulpit teeing off on his favorite targets—liberals, Catholics, liberals, The World Council of Churches and the growing culture of loose, decaying morals which, until that time I hadn't stopped to consider but after hearing him describe some in detail I couldn't get them out of my mind.

I was too young to have been fully comprehending what he was talking about, but somehow, in whatever he was saying, maybe it was his tone, I felt afraid and uncertain. And I remember thinking to myself, "If what he's saying is true then we are the only ones who are right and everyone else is wrong." And the thought scared me. I looked around that half filled sanctuary and I didn't like the odds that we were the only ones who were right. It wasn't comforting at all, rather it felt lonely and I didn't like what it meant for everyone whose parents hadn't taken them to church the way mine had. I didn't like the ramifications of what I was hearing for my best friend who was Roman Catholic.

I didn't like it at all and I still don't.

And that seems to be the very point of Pentecost. The presence of the Holy Spirit produced a great understanding among the people despite the glaring differences in them that could have easily resulted in division and hostility or a revisiting of old tribal abuses and grievances and wrongs that were decades, even centuries old.

What this new and increasingly religious diversity means for us is that the kind of hard line, dogmatic approach toward others, taken by some in the church today, is exactly the wrong approach. It's arrogant and offensive. What I have come to understand, which is something I don't think my childhood pastor ever did is this: In order for us to be right everyone else doesn't have to be wrong.

Learning to live peacefully, neighborly, even lovingly alongside of people from different cultures and who practice different religions will continue to be our challenge and it requires from us more than mere toleration. It requires a spirit of openness. It requires engagement and understanding. It requires, frankly, the same Spirit that helped accomplish it on Pentecost.

From time to time it will require that we hold our tongues. That we intentionally keep from doing that which comes naturally to us, like withdrawing only with our own kind. It will require that we refrain from behaving in the ways the world predictably behaves, or in speaking the language in which the world seems all too fluent. What is being demanded of us is that we refrain from engaging in the kind of arrogance the world doesn't respect or need.

And I'm convinced that to pull that off requires nothing less than our dependence on the Holy Spirit. Because when the Holy Spirit is present, there is no room for racism. When the Holy Spirit is present, there is no way for homophobia to fester and ferment. When the Holy Spirit is present there is no way for old and sometimes ancient hatreds to linger and corrupt. When the Holy Spirit is present, placing your own needs and concerns ahead of the needs and concerns of others will seem like an unnatural thing to do. Because when the Holy Spirit is present, the impossible can happen. Hatreds can melt, anger can die away, fear can evaporate and the young can see visions and old people who thought their dreaming days were over will dream new dreams.

May the Spirit of the living God fall afresh on each of us this day and on our world, creating in us room for others as well as for new visions and dreams. Maybe even allowing us a true taste of that heavenly banquet—the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

