

Hearing in Tongues

by Rev. Joe Connolly

My name is Peter. The day of Pentecost is a Jewish feast. We call it *Shavuot*. The feast commemorates the day God gave the *Torah*, the teachings, to Israel.

You may have heard from many people about something special which happened on that day— Pentecost— 2,000 years ago. I was there. Over the course of many years this is how I, Peter, have told the story of what happened on that day. (Slight pause.)

{1} When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. {2} And suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were. (The participants in inter-generational service make a sound like wind.) {3} Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and a tongue came to rest on each one of them. (The participants in inter-generational service wave streamers over their heads.) {4} All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (The participants in inter-generational service speak in several languages simultaneously.)

{5} Now there were devout people from every nation living in Jerusalem. {6} And at this sound, which was like the rush of a violent wind (again the sounds of wind are heard), a crowd gathered. They were bewildered to hear their native languages being spoken. {7} Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Surely all these people speaking are Galileans. {8} How does it happen that each of us hears these words in our own native language?” [1] (Slight pause.)

As I just said, that is how I tell the story. But that story, is really just me reciting words. I need to, I want tell you what my experience of that day was like. But I can't.

You see, when I said there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind— that was a metaphor. Was it really like that? No. It was not. My experience, the experience of all of us, cannot be described with mere words.

When I said tongues of fire came to rest on each of us— that was a metaphor. Was it really like that? No. It was not. My experience, the experience of all of us, cannot be described with mere words.

When I said we began to speak in other languages— that's a metaphor. Was it really like that? No. It was not. My experience, the experience of all of us, cannot be described with mere words.

However when I said we were, all of us, filled with the Holy Spirit— that is exactly what I mean. Suddenly for us God's teaching, God's *Torah*, became clear, became real.

And what is the teaching God has for us? The teaching God has for us is simple: we are to love one another. Jesus said that to us over and over and over again. And the teaching of God seemed alive in Jesus, was alive in Jesus. And we... and we... did not hear.

And now... now the Holy Spirit has filled our hearts, our being, with the reality of God's Word, the Words of Jesus, the words Jesus said to us about loving one another. You see, when the Holy Spirit fills the hearts, fills the being of people, they not only listen, they hear.

And so it was on that day of *Shavuot*, the day of Pentecost, the day that reminds us of the teachings of God, because of the presence of the Spirit of God, that we remembered what Jesus said, what Jesus told us. Love one another.

It's like this— when we really love one another we are empowered. We are empowered... we are empowered to hear what other people say, what they mean, what their experience is.

Indeed, did you hear what some people said several minutes ago. There was a boy afraid to go to school because other children laughed. That boy was afraid of being not good enough. And there was a young girl from Thailand, locked in a room, working 16 hours a day making toys.

Another person called themselves lucky— lucky because they had a job. But that person was fearful also. They had fear about downsizing, fear about overwork, fear about not seeing their own children, fear about how much life— *life*— takes out of each of us, even fear about not being able to leave a job— there might be no other work after all.

There was a woman who lived in Kenya, worked 18 hours a day, every day, cooking, cleaning, getting water, caring for her children, tending her garden. Yet this woman realized many considered her to be of no importance.

And yes, there are indigenous people in many countries who were promised lands, lands of their own. And yes, the land *does* belong to everyone, the land, the plants, the animals. These all need to be shared— shared by everyone. When we all share that is true justice.

This is clear: we all know there have been atrocities, people herded into railway cars, die in concentration camps. What we humans have done to each other is real, hurtful, frightening. [2] (Slight pause.)

And so, how do we fix that? We fix that by listening to what Jesus said; we fix that by doing the will of God; we fix that by loving one another.

We fix that by being aware there is no need to speak in tongues; there is a need to listen in tongues. We need to listen to one another, hear one another. We need to be aware of the cacophony of voices crying out for help, for love, for solace. (Slight pause.)

My name is Peter. The day of Pentecost is *Shavuot*, the feast that commemorates the day God gave the *Torah*, the teachings, to us. And this is what the *Torah* teaches, this is what God teaches, this is what Jesus teaches: hear in tongues.

Love one another. Love one another and we will know, we will be aware, that the Spirit of God is with us, now, forever, walking at our side... if... we... but... hear in tongues. God *is* still speaking. (At this point the preacher sits on the chancel steps.) [3]

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “This is a quote from the book *Credo*, written by the famous preacher William Sloan Coffin: ‘The whole world is your new neighborhood and all who dwell therein— black, white, yellow, red, stuffed and starving, smart and stupid, mighty and lowly, criminal and self respecting... all

become your sisters and brothers in the new family formed by Jesus. By joining a church you declare your individuality in the most radical way in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale.”

BENEDICTION: Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage, hold fast to that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing always in the power of the Holy Spirit. Be blessed with courage, faith, joy, peace. Amen.

[1] Acts 2:1-8, Inclusive Language Version. The verse numbers have been left in the text.

[2] This was “Inter-generational Sunday.” Many people young and old were involved. Earlier different people took on different parts and played each of the characters mentioned below. What was said was simply being reflected in the sermon. Therefore, what follows is an edited version of those words which said by those participants.

Participant # 1: There are many in our world today who have felt like the Hebrew people did in exile, lifeless, abandoned and with little sign of hope. Let’s hear from some of them now.

2: I am a boy, afraid to go to school. Other children laugh at me. I can’t seem to do anything right. Even when I try, it’s never good enough. I feel like giving up.

3: I am a young girl who lives in Thailand. My parents sent me to live in the city so I could make money to help support my family. But I am locked in a room, and I hardly ever get out, and I work 16 hours a day making toys.

#4: I’m one of the lucky ones I guess. I still have a job. But with all the downsizing, I do the work of 3 people. I’m always tired. I hardly ever see my kids. I hate the job, but I’m afraid to leave it. I don’t know what else I could do.

5: I live in Kenya. Like other women here I work 18 hours a day, every day, cooking, cleaning, getting water, caring for my children, gardening. Yet I am considered to be of no importance.

6: My people, the indigenous people of this country, were promised lands in a treaty that was to last forever. Now some of those lands, the plants and animals, the bones of our ancestors, are drowned under a lake for electric power to feed the big cities, our rivers polluted, fish gone. We cannot wait for justice forever.

#7: It’s so long ago, now. I was just a young Jewish child. My family, herded into railway cars, separated forever, everyone I ever know died in concentration camps.

[3] Needless to say, often a pastor closes what is said with “Amen.” In this case another one of the participants closed this:

“It says in Acts Peter spoke further about Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. The visitors were greatly moved and believed his message. They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers. This is how the Christian Church began 2,000 years ago: hearing in tongues. The Spirit that empowered the disciples long ago is the same Spirit that dwells in each of us and guides us in spreading God’s love. Amen and again amen!”