

Sermon Text for May 29, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Joel 2:27-28, Acts 2:1-4 *“The language of God”*

Next week we are so pleased to have Konstantin Resnik come and preach here at First Presbyterian for our communion Sunday. Konstantin is a pastor at the Bethany Slavic church, one of about 10 Russian language speaking churches in the Ephrata region. He is originally from Ukraine and we will be serving the Lord’s Supper together. Next week is also Pentecost and I love Pentecost and I love preaching on Pentecost because it is a story with which I resonate as normal every day people are given the ability to speak different languages from all over the world.

So, this Sunday I will be preaching from the classic Pentecost Scriptures of Joel and Acts, both of these Scriptures also happened to be on our daily readings for our 9 month Bible Challenge. Can I just take a minute and say that it is something you all should consider taking part in. Reading Scripture is powerful and it unlocks God’s truth in a way that we hope and we expect to be transformative.

The common preaching lesson for Pentecost which you have heard many times from this pulpit is that it is the birthday of the church. You know in some families there is one sibling that has a really hard time celebrating birthdays of the other children in the family simply because it is not their birthday. It is a fairly common experience, especially for the oldest sibling who had been used to being the only one whose birthday was made a big deal, and now when another member of the family has their birthday, well, it isn’t their birthday so grumpy pants get put on.

Our teaching in the past on Pentecost has been more of an only child birthday teaching where it has been directed to self-fulfillment, the Holy Spirit has been given to us and for us and so in a sense is ours. Don’t confuse it and complicate it with other people have any other right to the Holy Spirit. But what we find in these Scripture is quite the opposite, nothing could be further from the truth. The language of God was given to us specifically so that we can communicate not with ourselves, but with God.

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It is hard to understand what is happening in the minor prophets when we pick them up and just choose a verse or two in order to highlight a point that we are trying to make in a sermon. Which is why when you read the entire book, you get a fuller understanding of what is

taking place. The people of Israel and Judah are in captivity but there is hope that they will be able to return to their land and restoration is about to take place. The day of the Lord, that Joel talks about, is a time when restoration to Israel and return will be able to take place. A painful past of slavery and a hopeful future of returning home and restoring back all those things that were lost and now are able to be claimed again.

The day of the Lord is normally thought of as a celebration, but Joel makes clear that this restoration will take place as a result of pain and suffering and so really isn't something that we ought to look forward to with anticipation as if there is no cost involved or no price to pay. In a similar way as we celebrate memorial day this weekend it is a bit of a strange juxtaposition to take part in the activities that we take part as we remember those who have died so that we could enjoy the freedoms that we enjoy. What we are celebrating is inherently sad and it should be in many ways a day of mourning, but we have completely lost that element and focused only on what this day means for us and the benefits that we receive as a result. Again, a sense of self-fulfillment pervades our perspective within our society and culture. How does this benefit me, without thinking at all about what that event means for the families who are mourning their loss even to this day.

We see in vs.28 of Joel this phrase: then afterward, after the people have returned home from their exile, when that time of captivity has come to an end, then I will pour my Holy Spirit upon all flesh. All flesh will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Joel describes that when the Holy Spirit is poured out a very direct result will take place. Those who receive this Holy Spirit will be able to speak the language of God. There is a direct correlation between the giving of the Holy Spirit and the utterance of the language of God.

Sons and daughters will prophesy. Old and young will dream and have visions. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Joel is for the purpose of equipping and providing the church, the people of God with the language of God that is powerful and is able to change the culture and the society around it. It is for that purpose that the Holy Spirit is given, not for the individual who receives it to be strengthened for their own purposes, but rather so that the community as a whole, the nation as a whole, all of society can be transformed. Any other reason goes against God's desire and wish.

Then we get to Acts when once again the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh. Just like Joel the community, the disciples, just went through a very painful past and were looking forward to the future ahead of them. They had just chosen their twelfth disciple to replace Judas who was no longer with them. Matthias has come on board and so now the community is ready

for whatever comes up. We read that they are all together, we don't know what they were doing but we do know that they are together, in a house. It was almost as if they knew that God was about to do something to make them stronger. Maybe there was even a sense or a pervading thought that God is about to do something for us, to make us stronger, because it is going to be about us right now.

And just like Joel, the Holy Spirit falls on them and gives them a power unlike any other power that anyone else had, the language of God. I've had the opportunity to learn different languages throughout my life. There are basically two ways that you can learn a language. The first is you are born within a culture and a society and you learn it by growing up and by speaking it as a child. This is easy, Italian in many ways was one of my first languages because I lived in Rome until I was 8. I didn't have to work hard to learn it, it just came from being there. Another way which most of us who speak another language learn it by working hard, you learn it with vocabulary words and studying the grammar, but even then, it constantly is a struggle and you have to keep up with it.

But what I have found over time is that the learning about a language is so much more than just learning words. You can't learn another culture and another people unless you live with them and truly want to understand them. We live in a very specific culture and society here in Strasburg and our language is pretty insular and pretty specific to this region and this people. But this Scripture tells us that we have been given the opportunity, the power, the ability to learn another language, another culture, another people.

I was thinking about the different cultures that were represented in the most recent shootings. In Buffalo the victims were exclusively African-American. In California in a Presbyterian Church the victims were exclusively Asian. In Texas, children with teachers were gunned down. When the people who are gathered on Pentecost describe what they heard in their own language, their own culture, they said those speaking were talking about God's deeds of power. This power is given to exact change and to bring about something new.

I told session on Wednesday that we have been given that power to exact change, to bring about something new that is more in line with what the kingdom of God should be like. We have been given the power to not only speak about God's acts, but the power to interact with all people to bring about God's kingdom in our midst. A kingdom that seems so far away today. In fact, that kingdom is so far away that we have to face the truth which is that we have failed as a church. If we have been given the power of God to bring about a new heaven and a new earth,

how can we say that the church is effective at all when the same old story takes place week, after week, after week.

I told session and so today I am telling you as well, it is our job as a church to discern how to make change so that people will not be killed while they go grocery shopping. Or while they go to church, or while they're in school. It is our job and it today it is more obvious than ever that we have failed as a church. And just pointing out the problem and saying that our thoughts and prayers are with the victims isn't making a change. The greatest form of hypocrisy is to call out evil and knowing a solution to eradicate it and doing nothing about it. And I stand before you as the biggest hypocrite. My time here in Strasburg has not moved the needle at all in order to create a most just society and culture in Strasburg. At Pentecost according to Joel and Peter, we have been given the power to change the world and we have not.

Some here may say, well, I'm not the one who pulled the trigger, don't lump me in with everyone else. Unfortunately we are the ones. This Scripture proves it, we have been given a power and all we care about is if I can do what I want, when I want it and how I want it. Our hypocrisy is exposed and we continue to live in it. We say that we have our rights and all I want to do is live free and to that place down below with everyone else as long as I have my freedom.

The language of God was given on Pentecost to us, but not for us. A disciple of Jesus Christ asks the question first: how will what I do benefit others before they ask how will it benefit me. Let's shed our hypocrisy and use the power of God how it was meant to be used. Amen.