

Pentecost May 15, 2016 Ctw: Ezekiel 37: 1-6 Acts 2:1-11 Genesis 11:1-9
“Finding (and hearing) the Right Words”

“I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing.” How many times we have been there. A friend loses a relative. Somebody gets a divorce. There’s a miscarriage. Somebody gets cancer. What can you say? The right words often don’t seem to be there.

Sometimes it seems as though the modern mainline church cannot find the right words, either. When it comes to speaking a word of hope or challenge to today’s world, we are often uncertain and mute. We’ve been told to love God and to love others... We often struggle to do either. It can be hard to love outsiders, and sometimes it’s *really* hard to love our Christian brothers and sisters.

The social ethicist Walter Rauschenbush once compared Christians to a group of porcupines on a cold night. They know that they ought to huddle together to keep warm, but every time they try, they end up hurting one another with their quills. As church folks we need to be able to laugh at ourselves, and to laugh at our differences, and to know that we all make mistakes, and to understand that what bothers us most about our neighbors is often what we most dislike in ourselves. When we can do this, we take *ourselves* off of center stage and let God be there, and then the Holy Spirit can work through us. Which brings us to Pentecost!

Every year we observe the day of Pentecost, which first happened to the followers of Jesus not long after Jesus had gone up into the clouds, ascending into heaven after telling them to go to Jerusalem and wait. Jesus had promised them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, to give them power to be witnesses to the whole world.

From Acts 2, we heard how, on Pentecost, the disciples and other believers, some 120 in all, waited in an upper room as the city of Jerusalem was filled with Jews who had traveled there from many countries to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost.

Each year we hear this. Every year I pray that I and all of us might be swept into new faith by the power of God’s Holy Spirit coming upon us and working in and among us. The song, “Fill My Cup, Lord,” comes to mind. But for me, the image changes, and my cup is already too full, full of worries, expectations, fears, angers, concerns with myself. So the blessings God sends cannot get into my “cup”! At Pentecost, we try to empty ourselves enough to be filled by God.

Over the years, folks have reacted to the idea of Pentecost, “I don’t think our church wants to be a holy roller church or anything like that...” or “I am in my eighties, pastor, and I’ve gone to church most of those years, and I have yet to see Pentecost make any difference in my life or in my church.”

So what *is* Pentecost?? What can it have to do with us? Can these “bones” live?

Let’s say that you are a Christian who at one time in your life got really excited about Jesus and felt led to formally accept him as your Lord and Savior. Everything seemed so clear then, and

you felt as though you were walking about a foot off the ground as you *knew* that God loved you and forgave your sins and had a plan for your life. You felt as though you had the answers to any question, and you wanted to share your new joy with others, with everybody.

But time passed, and life went more back to “normal.” You found yourself missing the closeness you had felt with the Lord. You’d still go to church, and sometimes something spoke to you, but a lot of the time, perhaps most of the time, nothing did. The aggravations and problems of your life demanded your time and energy, and pretty soon this “Jesus stuff” was pretty well on the back burner, especially when it came to your interactions with other people. You still wanted to be Christian, and you still wanted to be a good person and help others, but somehow the thrill of it and the energy for it just were not there any more. And people could be SO ANNOYING!

That’s what today is about! If you drive a car, you have to refuel it every now and then. If you use a cell phone, it needs to be recharged. Pentecost shows us how to get recharged in our faith, because we cannot do it by ourselves. As a congregation we get worn out, as individual Christians we become exhausted, out of breath... So we need the holy breath of God to restore us.

Just before he ascended, Jesus told his followers to go and wait in Jerusalem. The Rev. Zan Holmes, a retired pastor/professor from Texas who spoke at our New York Annual Conference a few years ago, suggested that Jerusalem - for every one of Jesus’s followers - was the place where they had failed Jesus. As he had given them the last supper in the Upper Room, trying to let them know that he would suffer and die, they had argued among themselves about who was the best disciple. As Jesus agonized over what lay ahead of him and asked his friends to stay awake with him, they fell asleep and let him down. It was in Jerusalem as Jesus was beaten and grilled by the authorities that Peter three times denied even knowing Jesus. Nobody stood up for him or stood by him. They all had failed him in Jerusalem.

Holmes imagined how the disciples might have wanted to say, “Hey, Jesus, don’t make us go back to Jerusalem! Let us go to Bethany, where the Palm parade took place, or somewhere we did well, where we didn’t mess up so badly; not *Jerusalem.*” But Jesus told them to go to the place where they had failed so miserably and lost their direction...Go there, where you feel the most broken, the least powerful, where you just don’t see a way forward, and wait to find out what God can do with you and your situation.

On Pentecost God’s Spirit restored Jesus’ followers, and more than that, gave them the right words so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses to all those Jews who had come from everywhere to celebrate Pentecost. It’s powerful that God worked through language, through words. The reading we heard from Genesis told of God confusing the language of the peoples of the world as they worked together to try to build a tower to heaven. At Babel the various languages were used by God to build walls between the peoples so that they could no longer communicate and work together. But NOW, in the second chapter of Acts, on that Pentecost morning for those in Jerusalem, God used languages to give the Christians the *ability to be witnesses*, to find the right

words in languages they did not even know, to give good news to all who could hear their words about the Word of God, Jesus!

Today, many churches and Christians feel low on power and at a loss for words. We know we're supposed to feed people, and so we try our best through our Food Pantry. But when it comes to people whose lives have been broken, folks who have little vision for tomorrow or no job for today, those who feel alone or worthless as they trudge through life, those who grieve, what can we say?

To find our words, we must look and listen for God's Word. Fortunately, we do not have to look all on our own, for we can ask God to send the Holy Spirit to give us understanding of His Word for us. The Holy Spirit can help us recognize the presence of Jesus with us and the needs around us. Sometimes we simply point to Jesus as we stand, without words, with someone else who is hurting. Sometimes we share our hope in the Lord, as God gives us utterance.

I share a story, a bit strange but hopefully helpful. It is titled "The Tower," and was written by Charles Arcodia:

There was once a country where none of the people ever lifted their heads. They always looked downwards, just in front of them. In spite of that, every person in this country spent their entire lives earching for the highest tower in the world.

Of course, no one ever found the tower, because not one head was lifted. So they were a restless people, never happy with staying in one place, always searching and forever moving about. Every day you could see them walking up and down all the winding little roads, studying maps and arguing with each other.

There were, in fact, signs that pointed to the tower. But since the people would not look up, they never saw the signs. Instead, they argued with each other about the "right" road to the tower. They never followed a road to its end, because as soon as they had traveled a little way, they were persuaded to try a different road. Thus they went around in circles.

One day a man named Trevor was walking about when he saw a large gathering of people. They were clustered around the lake, all pointing excitedly at the reflection of the tower in the water. Many of them jumped into the lake and were drowned. Some of the others said that the tower was evil; others said that there was no tower.

In the commotion that followed, Trevor was knocked over. Now this might not sound like a very important event, but in a country where all the people always look down at the road in front of them, people just didn't fall over very often. When the crowd had cleared, Trevor was still lying flat on his back. When he opened his eyes, he could see the tower, way off in the distance! He tried to tell his countrymen, but they thought he was out of his mind. In fact, they considered it a sign of disgrace that he had fallen over like that.

So Trevor journeyed towards the tower alone. There were many roads that seemed to lead to it, but he took the nearest one. The journey was not easy. The road was sometimes rough and bumpy. And sometimes he wasn't sure that he was headed in the right direction. A couple of times he slipped and fell over. But it was at these times that he was able to gaze up at the tower and get his bearings once again.

As he went on, Trevor noticed that the only other people who traveled in the right direction were the sick, the crippled, the lame and the hungry. For only persons who had fallen were able to look up and see the tower. (*Stories for Sharing*, Arcodia, pp. 33-34)

End of that story. But today can be a beginning for us, those of us who dare to let our uncertain spirits look up and ask God to send upon us the Holy Spirit, that we may find the words and the hope and the power to share the love of Jesus Christ with this world, here in Winsted and over there, wherever "over there" may be.

How desperately we need the breath (in Hebrew, *Ruach*) of Pentecost today! Not just for the life of this or any particular congregation, but for larger reasons... God can show us how to proclaim a message of salvation understandable and relevant to this world and perhaps even to our children and grandchildren. God's Spirit can update and recharge our articulation, our enthusiasm, even our sense of mission and direction...

Can these bones live? The prophet Ezekiel had the good sense to say, "You know, Lord." May WE have the faith to utter the same words, "You know, Lord, what we are and what we can be. You know who we are and what we can do. You know how out of fuel and words we feel, how worn out we are. Please give us power to live, to be your faithful church." Amen.