

Hyperconnectivity

Acts 2; 1-13

June 18, 2017

Rev. Dr. John M. Buchanan

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

I had my Happy Father's Day to all those that went before. My father died way too young, but his gifts to me become more and more precious with each year. Even if we're not fathers, we had a father and a grandfather, and significant people in our lives. And today is a good day to remember them all. I have five children – five grown children – all married with families of their own, and it happens that they're all doing something fun and interesting this morning. I'm the only one working. They all did check in all saying essentially the same thing, "Happy Father's Day, Dad – catch up with you later." In any event, it's a great day to remember all those who have birthed us and nurtured us and taught us. Let us pray.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts to your Word that hearing we might believe and believing, trust you with our lives, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The New Testament lesson is from the Acts of the Apostles, the second chapter – the account of the Day of Pentecost. Listen for God's Word. When the Day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush from a violent wind and filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as a fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability. Now, there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. At the sound a crowd gathered and was bewildered because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that we hear each of us in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia and Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and Proselytes, Cretans and Arabs) in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed saying to one another, "What does this

mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Fire, wind, people babbling in different languages, confusion, cacophony, chaos! It’s enough to make an orderly Presbyterian like me very nervous. Presbyterians after all like to do things decently and in order – that phrase is in our church’s constitution in a section called the Book of Order. We think ‘decently and in order’ characterizes Presbyterianism. We have rules and careful procedures for every eventuality. We worry about too much spontaneity. We’re definitely uncomfortable with emotional outbursts, particularly in church. James Forbes, the former preaching minister of Riverside Church in Manhattan, grew up in the Pentecostal tradition and says that the very idea of the Holy Spirit frightens mainline Protestants, particularly Presbyterians, and admittedly what the Acts of the Apostles says happened on the Day of Pentecost sounds a lot more like a Pentecostal revival than a stately, dignified Presbyterian order of worship. There’s that word again – order. Please indulge a favorite story:

It was a Sunday morning in a very orderly church like this one. As the sermon began and minister made his first point, a woman sitting in the back row said out loud, “Amen, brother!” People turned around and looked at her curiously. And when the preacher got to the second point she said louder this time, “Oh yes! Thank you Jesus! Preach it!” More stares, consternation, discomfort level rising. When the preacher arrived at his third and concluding point the woman stood up and raised her hands in the air and shouted, “Thank you Jesus! Praise the Lord!” An usher approached, “Is there something wrong ma’am?” She said, “Well, no. I’m fine. I just have the spirit!” “Well,” the usher sniffed, “you certainly didn’t get it here.”

I learned a new word from Thomas Friedman in a New York Times column which is a new and I think helpful way to think about Pentecost and what happened, and the Holy Spirit. That word is *hyperconnectivity*. Friedman wrote sometime around the year 2000 the world achieved a very high level of connectivity virtually flattening the economic playing field. This web of connectivity was built on the diffusion of personal computers, fiber optic cable, the Internet and webservers.

What this platform did was make Boston and Beijing and Detroit neighbors. It brought two billion people into the global conversation.

But now, Friedman says, we've gone from a connected world to a hyper-connected world connecting Boston and Beijing and Detroit and now Bator in inner Mongolia. The deeper penetration of connectivity is built on smarter cell phones, wireless bandwidth, and social networks. This newer network being so cheap and mobile brought another two billion people into the conversation from more remote areas. And so you can sit in the comfort of your home in Lake Forest and see what's going on today in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Berlin, and Seoul – at least I'm told you can, I don't know how to do that. Nothing, Friedman said, is local anymore or secret for that matter. There are enormous social and political implications. Dictators can no longer totally isolate their regimes and their behavior from the rest of the world and hide what they are doing from their own people – by shutting down the newspapers and expelling CNN and BBC so long as people have smart phones.

It's fascinating this new globalism – this world wide conversation, this hyper-connectivity. But it is also, I think, theologically and spiritually significant. And I think it has a lot in common with what happened a long time ago on the Day of Pentecost. It's a pivotal event for the small fledgling Jesus movement in Jerusalem and up in Galilee. Sometimes we call it the birthday of the Church, but first it was - and is - a Jewish holiday fifty days after Passover. Fifty days as well for that little group of Jesus followers after the traumatic events of his arrest and trial and execution. And then three days later the mysterious experience that they couldn't even begin to describe – his resurrection. So, they're waiting to figure out what to do next – waiting for something to happen seven weeks and a day of waiting in that little room that was their hiding place in the middle of the capital city. It was still dangerous to be seen publicly and associated with the rabble rousing rabbi from Nazareth. So they're behind locked doors on Pentecost not in a temple praying when things did begin to happen literally beyond their ability to describe. The sound of alighting wind, tongues of fire. Medieval artists love to paint this dramatic and mysterious scene. El Greco's painting of Pentecost being perhaps the best known – flames on the apostles' heads someone said like propane jets.

I remember seeing that picture in a Sunday school book and asking the teacher if the disciples' hair was on fire.

Well, they do the most remarkable thing – they leave the room, their secure haven for seven weeks. They come out – they literally go public, and then most remarkably of all they begin to tell the story of Jesus not in the Aramaic which was the language they all spoke, but in the different languages of all the people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world to observe Pentecost. The whole world was there - Parthians, Medes, Cappadocia, Asia, Egypt, Rome, Arabia – this new thing that was happening with the followers of Jesus precipitated an outbreak of global connectivity.

What was it like? Well, we can't know. Luke, who is the author of the gospel that bears his name, also wrote the Acts of the Apostles - is not a newspaper reporter. He's more of an artist trying to find words to describe an experience that simply will not be reduced to words. And so he uses extravagant images – rushing wind, tongues of fire – like Georgia O'Keeffe painting a flower conveying the essence of an iris with exaggerated colors and shapes that are passionate and literally alive.

Here is what we do know. Jesus's disciples, along with some other followers including Mary, Jesus's mother, are still hiding for very good reason. They're afraid. And then something happened that transformed their fear into courage because they walked out of the safety and security of that room and began to expose themselves to speak openly, “Yes we are his friends and followers. Yes he was crucified but he rose again and is alive, and we're here to tell you about it and witness and verify to its truth.” Something happened to transform timid frightened victims into brave and faithful Christians willing now to risk their very lives for their faith. Something happened so that these rural Galilean peasants were able to communicate to speak and be heard from by people from all over the world. On Pentecost Jesus went viral. Different nations, races, tribes, cultures – total strangers to one another – isolated in their own little worlds became connected – hyper connected by the common language of God's love in Jesus Christ.

The miracle of Pentecost is not, as is often understood, people babbling incoherently speaking in tongues. It's the opposite of that. The miracle of Pentecost is people speaking and hearing and understanding the miracle, that is to say, of communication. We believe in a God who brings people together – a God who mends brokenness, transforms separation into unity and wholeness and peace and will take such pains to let us know the whole world with its marvelous diversity – racial diversity - cultural linguistic was there. And Luke wants us to know that God's spirit, the lively presence and energy of God, the Holy Spirit, transcends diversity and creates something new – a community now that speaks and listens and hears and understands.

The late Peter Gomes, long time minister of Memorial Church on the campus of Harvard, said something very wise about diversity one time. Now, Peter was an African American man. "Diversity," he said, "is a blessing but it can also be a curse when we are captives to our own language divided by our inability to hear or to be heard, to understand or to be understood." At Pentecost diversity was overcome by a power that transcended it, a power to understand – to hear in one's own language. Pentecost, Gomes said, did not reduce or diminish the diversity of that crowd. They didn't become less than they were, they become more than they had been because they became one with all those who heard and understood that God was alive and active in the world. That's a word – an idea – that could not be more relevant today. We've been sobered by the realization that American culture is deeply and uniquely divided. That our beloved *e pluribus unum* has a lot more *pluribus* these days than *unum*. In fact, what has happened is frequently described as a new tribalism – two distinct tribes that live in the same area or country but in total isolation, speaking different languages, living in a different culture, reading different newspapers, watching different cable news, listening to different commentators. Each views the other with suspicion, weariness, dislike, and sometimes finally hatred which just last week spilled over in violence.

JD Vance's bestseller *Hillbilly Elegy* describes the cultural values of his Appalachian family buffeted by unemployment with little or no possibility or hope. In a way that sheds light on what has happened and is happening to us. There is no

more important item on the nation's agenda and the Church's agenda than the challenge of communicating across the deep and dangerous cultural divide. Episcopal bishop Rob Herschfeld in a pastoral letter to his New Hampshire parish churches urges his people to become involved in public witness to Christian values which means in the political and social agenda, but he also challenges people to do something more than that – more than political activism. We're called to witness and act on our values, he said, but I believe God is asking something even more risky, more dangerous, more uncomfortable –to extend the peace of Christ to those with who we find ourselves on the other side politically. A healing example of that also happened, thanks be to God last week as republican and democrat baseball teams knelt together on the playing field and prayed. Bishop Hirschfeld went on, "I agree with those observers who said that part of the reason our nation is in its present predicament is because we have lost the ability to take seriously the pain – the full story of our estranged neighbors." I think Jesus did that – listening to his neighbors, even the ones that irked him. If there is anything more important for followers of Jesus Christ who are citizens of the United States of America in 2017 I do not know what it might be. Communication, connectivity depends not only on the ability to speak clearly, but even more importantly on the ability to listen.

One of the saints of the Presbyterian Church, the late UT Kurr, for years was editor of a fine theological journal *Theology Today*. I still have in my files an editorial he wrote in the midst of all the heat and argument during the Vietnam era and Civil Rights. He wrote, "Our failure to communicate is not a failure of technique but of will. We don't want to communicate. We'd rather shout one another down." Reminded me of all the conflicts and arguments I've been in over the years, and I have been in a few in the Presbyterian church, and how little real communication, speaking and hearing happened. It reminded me of all the personal conversations I've been part of in which I really wasn't listening to what the other person was saying because I was so busy organizing my thoughts about how I would respond brilliantly. It reminded me of those conversations when I was trying to share something – an idea, an experience, a book I read, a concern – and before I was done speaking my conversation partner interrupted me to tell me about an experience or book he had just read, or her recent illness. Sometimes in the most intimate human relationships one or the other, or both, simply stop listening and

instead retreat into silence which leads to isolation, which leads to the hell of loneliness – not listening, not speaking, not communicating.

This Christian faith of ours from the very beginning has been a remarkably connective religion. This faith of ours includes belief in the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit actively among us bringing together separate cultures, races, nations – and individuals. This faith of ours is in a God whose precious gift to us is speaking and hearing communication, and who is always and forever working to bring together to mend, to reconcile you and your dear ones, you and your enemies, races, cultures, nations until the day when all the barriers are down and the boundaries are gone and all or one in the kingdom has come. A God who in the mean time comes to each of us – sometimes loudly, aggressively, as on Pentecost, but more I think softly, quietly, moving us to open our hearts, our minds, our lives to God and to one another.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann – one of our very best thinkers – says that whenever communication happens it is always evidence of God’s good gift of the Holy Spirit. That capacity to speak and to hear is always a gift from God. You know, there is no more powerful way to deny the being of another than by refusing to listen. No better way to destroy intimacy than by stopping listening. And there is no better way to love than to listen. That’s what happened at Pentecost. God’s spirit came, people spoke, people heard, people understood, people connected. The world needs that desperately this morning. The world needs a church that demonstrates that in its mission and in its life together. Hyperconnectivity. Amen.