
Spread Good Gossip – Pentecost!

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Pentecost Sunday – Year C

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?...In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power. Acts 2.8,11

What a babble it must have been on that Day of Pentecost! What a clutter of language and energy, yes, but also a clutter of confusion!

The early Christians were amazed that they could hear in their own languages. But, since my own hearing is quite bad, I admit today that I would have loved to be able to hear anything at all!

Yes, these days, what I really wish is that I could hear at all. As some of you know, my hearing has declined in the past five years. I really do not hear as well as I once did. Now, I know why people often complain about being able to hear in this very space, the nave of the Cathedral of St. Philip. It's embarrassing.

People call my name and I don't turn my head. People think I am ignoring them, when I really don't even hear you – unless I see you looking directly at me. It's embarrassing. People see me get impatient.

So, I would have been completely frustrated on the Day of Pentecost! It's hard enough for me to hear when one person is talking, but when more than one person is talking, it is especially challenging. And if more than one person is speaking in a completely different language, why, I too would have been wondering if the crowd had gotten into the wine too early.

But, even you can hear quite well, it takes skill, and it takes a gift, to be able to filter out the world's noises in order to hear one thing.

Imagine that you could hear, in one moment, all the incredible sounds occurring right now, on earth. It would sound much like the opening seconds of that tremendous movie, *The Matrix*. Even if you have not watched the entire movie, listen to those first seconds of *The Matrix*, when the sounds occurring all over the earth are heard at once. The cacophony is overwhelming, but also exhilarating. It is the glorious collected babble of ancient Tower of Babel.

Much of what happens in the church can also sound like that cacophony. Listen to all the voices that the church collects. Sobs wail out along with laughter. Praise and glory sing right alongside complaint and anxiety. Inquiry and wonder provide harmony to dogma and creed.

Our tendency, in church, is to imitate, to repeat the things we hear. This is what all human beings and animals do, and Christians do it, too. We learn by repeating. This is why it is so important to speak the good things, to imitate the good things in life, to spread the good gossip – because it will get repeated. One of my leadership principles is just that: Spread Good Gossip. Speak about things you do want repeated.

Many of you have heard my favorite Pentecost example. One of the greatest imitators in the kingdom of God is the mockingbird, who sings one of the birdsongs I can still hear! Most of you have heard the mockingbird, even if you cannot

identify it. The mockingbird is the source of that incessant chattering, more chattering than the most obnoxious human gossip you know.

In fact, however, the mockingbird loves to imitate other songs. He sings what he hears. Some say that mature mockingbirds know over five hundred songs. He is not mocking those songs; he is just imitating them. He is miming; *mimus polygottus* is his biological name. (The Spanish language has the bird named right: “centzontle,” they call it, “the bird of four hundred songs.”)

I talked with a shop owner once who said that a mockingbird outside his store had learned to imitate the sound of the UPS truck backing up. Then, the bird learned to imitate all the various rings on people’s cell phones. Surely in the American south, there is no bird heard more incessantly and frequently. It is the state bird of Florida, Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, and Mississippi. Just like the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, and Arabs, on the Feast of Pentecost.

What a pity that the mockingbird is named for mocking, for I believe the melody that winds its way through song after song is really a song of praise. I believe the mockingbird is essentially a joyful bird (except maybe for that obnoxious crooner at night, looking for a mate). So, on every Pentecost Sunday in the Church, I want to re-name the mockingbird, the Pentecost Bird.

The mockingbird is the Pentecost Bird. Not because of its colors (it wears no flaming wings of fire), but because of its song, its one song that is really a collection of songs. Listen to it wag this way, and then that. The mockingbird’s songs are the collected songs of the entire earth. They are babbling songs from Babel. Those collected songs are the voices, the languages, of everyone.

The Christian Church has the same ability to sing the collected songs of the entire earth. But the Christian Church can sound like the mockingbird at nine o’clock in the morning. To the outside ear, perhaps the untrained ear, the song sounds like a drunken chorus; the singers must be filled with new wine.

But, the miracle of Pentecost occurs when these sounds do not sound chaotic, but lovely. It is as if the rushing wind of a new morning has brought another listening chamber to us, perhaps another sanctuary, where all these voices and songs do not clatter and clash with one another; rather they dance together in a new reality. The miracle of Pentecost is the reversal of the Tower of Babel. Instead of dividing people, Pentecost unites people! The miracle of Pentecost is the miracle that holds the church together: that, no matter what the language, we hear! We hear the power and grace of God.

The book of Acts says that the folks on the outside sneered at the disciples. But the Greek word is not “sneered.” The King James Version of the bible gets the translation right; the outsiders were “mocking” the Christians. “They are drunk with new wine!” they mocked.

Oh, would that the church was drunk with new wine, chattering wildly about the praises of God. Not mocking. Mocking occurs when one does not trust the Spirit. To mock means to not believe the power of God’s Spirit. Mocking is bad gossip. We are meant to be not the mockers, but the singers. We are meant to be Pentecost Birds, singing wildly and jauntily. Pentecost is good gossip!

On the Day of Pentecost, we sing songs that come from every language and voice and tradition of the world, but which say one thing: God is praised. God is blessed in all of creation. That is what the mockingbird sings every day. That is what Pentecost Birds sing every day.

These infants we are baptizing today are being baptized into imitation. They will learn what they see and hear. Baptism is about imitation. We are meant to be imitators of Christ, too. Will we imitate the songs of praise and glory? Or will we just imitate the clanging anxiety of a truck backing up? When we ring someone up on our cell phone, do we have something blessed to say?

The Day of Pentecost is a day for singing good songs, for spreading good gossip, singing songs that come from every language and voice and tradition of the world, but which say one thing: God is praised. God is blessed in all of creation.

Spread good gossip! That is what the mockingbird sings every day. That is what Pentecost birds sing every day. This is what Christians sing every day.

AMEN.

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