
Pentecost and the Mockingbird

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Day of Pentecost

*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

Amidst all this babble and clutter and language, we name children today. Pentecost is a baptism Sunday, and our church is filled with energy and new life, new people and new names! I love these new names we are about to bestow on God's new people.

I want to give one of my friends a new name today. But it is not a person I want to re-name; it's a bird. I have heard these birds all my life. I have heard this bird chortle early in the morning, and late in the middle of the night. I hear them outside the window at home, and in the playground outside this Cathedral.

It is the mockingbird. It is the mockingbird whose song greets me everywhere, and what a song it is. Most of you have heard it, even if you cannot identify it. The mockingbird is the source of that incessant chattering; he chatters more than the most obnoxious human gossip in Buckhead.

In fact, 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 this week with the man who runs the "Wild Birds Unlimited" store up on Roswell Road. He says a mockingbird used to sing outside his old store. That mockingbird 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. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, and Arabs.

Well, it's a pity that the mockingbird is named the mockingbird. I believe the melody that winds its way through song after song is a song of praise. I believe the mockingbird is essentially a joyful bird (except for that obnoxious crooner at night, looking for a mate). So, today, 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, because it contains 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.

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 Babel.

Much of what happens in the church sounds like 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.

In the church, there is talk about sex and money. There is talk about power and greed. There is talk about humility and kindness. There is talk about service and offering.

Ah! The church!

It is the sound of 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. Even if it were nine o'clock in the evening, the song would sound like some sort of intricate jazz number, with melodies and improvisations ricocheting all around us.

The miracle of Pentecost is that 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 Babel. The miracle of Pentecost is the miracle that holds the church together; no matter what the language, we hear the power and grace of God.

We hear in the book of Acts that the folks on the outside sneered at the Christians. 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. But we are not mocking.

Mocking occurs when one does not trust the Spirit. To mock means to not believe the power of God's spirit. Thus, we are meant to be not the mockers, but the singers. We are not meant to be mockingbirds, but Pentecost Birds, singing wildly and jauntily.

We are meant to imitate the songs of people praising God, no matter what language they may be speaking.

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 sing 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?

"Do not be deceived," St. Paul said to the Galatians (6.7), "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow." We reap what we sow.

The Day of Pentecost is meant to be a day of sowing good songs, 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. This is what Christians sing every day.

AMEN.

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