

Pentecost Year C

“In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power”

We have just returned from Austin, the occasion being our daughter Katie’s wedding, but our granddaughter Elliott managed inevitably to share center stage nonetheless. She has begun really talking. She can say our names...I’m Bobo, which is what I called my father ...Katharine is Kite, a nickname Katharine’s Grandfather gave her grandmother....A highlight for Elliot during the week is when the garbage truck pulls up to the apartment dumpster... she points and says “wow”...”cool!” She’s learning new words every day and even though she hasn’t mastered the art of English quite yet... the words she uses tell us something about who she is....her personality comes through...In her nascent efforts of speech, she is expressing in no small way the mystery of who she is; and in hearing what is said all around her she is learning the lore of family and culture of which she will be an integral and intimate part.

Now certain past Alabama gubernatorial candidates notwithstanding, I believe it is important to honor the native tongue, because in so doing we honor the most important symbol of one’s culture, and therefore an important symbol of one’s personhood...there’s dignity in that....I want to talk about Spirit as language, language our God given gift...two other metaphors are used by Luke, wind and fire, but the operable one here in Acts is language...Spirit as Word...sound familiar...Luke is in good company with the writer of the Gospel of John...in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God...and the Word dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Word...self expression...God expressing God’s self in the beginning through speech.... In a word, a thing of beauty.

Today, the Day of Pentecost in the church, we read the Lukan account of the Holy Spirit descending upon and empowering the gathered faithful at a festival in Jerusalem...we are told that their faith burned so brightly that they were able to communicate through enlightened language God’s great deeds of power, so that others joined the faith as well...the blooming forth of a church, an important theme in Luke...and let us note here a highly diverse church, Pontus and Asia, Cappadocia, etc. even Cretans and Arabs we are told....the church blooming across national and ethnic lines....not beyond language, but language as the means.

So I want us to take something of a different look at this familiar passage in Acts...On one level, this is the culmination of the becoming and sending forth of the people of God....beginning with Adam...through the

patriarchs and Moses, the judges, the prophets, the monarchy, captivity, the resettlement...and now the raised Jesus the new way forward....just as Israel has always reinvented itself...always in relationship with the one who loves her...that's classical biblical history...you know about that...but I think there is something more...perhaps there is a way here to speak of this mysterious Spirit as something more than other, something that comes from out there...the Spirit, the Shekinah in Hebrew... means God's indwelling...so let's look at the story in context:

There are two things that I think are keys in this text: First is, whenever we read Hebrew rhetoric and biblical literature, the whole of scripture, we must be aware of the persistent tension around ethnicity. The Jew and the stranger, the Jew and the gentile...Israel and the nations...the story of the woman at the well, a Canaanite, a symbol of the despised other, a case in point...calling the Samaritan good (Samaritans despised by Jews) calling the Samaritan neighbor...some in the audience would surely cringe... throughout this biblical literature, the hearer is constantly having to contend with the virtue of loving stranger, loving neighbor, up and against the cultural norm of distrusting and shunning the other....facing the virtue of loving neighbor....not just to be polite, but for the sake of salvation, that is, the well being and dignity of all, the reconciliation of friend and stranger, the means of salvation....so here Luke throws it in our face.....we are told that at this grand festival there were some devout Jews living in Jerusalem not just of different ethnic origin, but of every ethnic origin under heaven, and gentiles as well....so the xenophobic tension rears its head in spades... the notion of stranger, of difference...still at issue, as it certainly is for us in the present day....and what is it that breaks this barrier? This all important barrier between neighbor and stranger that would thwart the very process of salvation itself...what breaks the barrier...where is all the energy in this story?...Well it's language, right?...this is a story about the power of language, the alchemical grace of revealing ourselves, our true selves to the other....language the imaginative art by which we reveal the essence of who we are, which reveals dare I say who God is, we made in God's image... Who doesn't know the power of spoken words between people who love each other...that's not other, that's real and alive...who doesn't know the life change that words of welcome engender. I think Luke here is saying that it is the uttered word that is the means of the Spirit....words, both spirit and flesh,...we hear them through fleshly vibrations, through the senses....we can feel words like wind and fire, annunciating breath....words physical and spiritual....one and the same...as we are.... The Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison says that it is language that makes us human....and I would add to

that... it is language that makes us divine also...that is point two...that language bears Spirit...the word from the source ...language an eruption of the imagination, the eruption of human essence....At each uttered word there is critical mass for renaissance...imagination and truth born anew. Elliot is experiencing such a renaissance in her early life: The experience and joy of self expression.

And then there is a third dynamic at play here...and that is the presence of hospitality and welcome...the welcome of the native tongue, the welcome of the stranger...hospitality and welcome that disposes of, disables, heals the fear of stranger, and enables us to live as God lives...in welcome and abundance...the hallmarks of God's gracious commonweal... spoken into being...in words of sincerity and truth God's deeds of power are made known...God's principal deed of welcome spoken into being... words in truth are sacrifice...our very breath sacrificed, offered for the true and the good....spoken to reorder the world as God sees it.

Maybe there is someone here who has lived outside their native land, learned another language, assimilated...and I can only imagine the sheer rapture of hearing once again, quite by surprise, one's own native tongue... words from the nursery... words discovered at an early age by which one named the universe around them...words for the people one is called to love....words that utter the creation into being no less....the imagination given flesh and life...The Greeks, and other learned cultures taught the art of words to persuade...rhetoric...the art of changing things with words...God on our lips, Spirit voice speaking the creation into being...speaking the words of forgiveness....words of mercy and welcome...words demanding justice and peace... St. John calls the Spirit the advocate which means that we, bearing the Spirit, are called to a life of advocacy... passionate words of advocacy that resound with all truth and will change, recreate the world for the better...the chief means of advocacy are words;.....Words bear the Spirit and words bear love, love that pines for the well being of all.... As real as wind and fire.

So according to Luke the Spirit is not some other worldly creature aloof in the heavens...or hiding in a church tabernacle (perhaps that's the way we'd rather the Spirit to be...safe, tame, minding her own business)... No, Luke speaks of a roiled and blustery Spirit among us, enfleshed anew with every new breath uttered...all utterances of the imagination... Spirit which binds in sacred hospitality...binds us as human community in love, spirit that teaches us with resonant words beautiful in their appearing... words that change things...beauty changes things...the Spirit will never leave well enough alone, because the Spirit will forever continue speaking

the universe into its perfection. My hope for Elliott is that she grows wise with words and gives them graciously and eloquently to the world around her as life changing Spirit. It is the most any of us can hope for. Let us speak the Spirit within us until the end of time when perhaps there will no longer be need for words...no need for words? I can't imagine that.