

## Pentecost Year C

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

Some twelve or so years ago our family travelled to Florence Italy, where the girls’ choir is going in just a few days...I’m jealous. It is an elegant city...perhaps the most beautiful city in the world....Its architecture...its food...the art....its music...its intriguing history...It is where the Renaissance began....as if there were an eruption of the imagination in a certain space called Firenze at a certain time beginning in the fourteenth century...a critical mass of light and truth finding a crack in the surface of the earth....this force of imagination flooding into consciousness changing the face of the earth...beauty will do that.

One day while we were there we went just outside of Florence to the Villa Gambaria which has one of the most beautiful gardens in Tuscany, a terraced parterre overlooking an ancient olive orchard...We stayed for a couple of hours in the cool of the morning....finally it was time to catch the bus back into town....we walked toward the bus stop which was a little down the hill, and we came upon a solitary figure...an older man with an old coat, a hat with earflaps, work boots...Roberto our friend who is a tour guide, but won’t let us pay him (friends don’t charge friends, he says), Roberto who’d come with us whispered, That’s the gardener...that’s the gardener of the Villa Gambaria.....I asked quickly... “How do you say.... “Your garden is beautiful” in Italian?...and Roberto said “Il giardino est bellissimo.” So I repeated those words to the gardener.... His eyes met mine and deepened...he nodded solemnly.... “Molte Grazie.” He said....As we walked on to the bus...Roberto told me that I had said the phrase well...and that the gardener heard my sincerity....heard it in his own language spoken by one he’d never met.

Now certain 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 it....now this isn’t going to be a sermon on immigration reform, though it could be....no this is a sermon about the Holy Spirit....Spirit as language, language our God given gift...two metaphors are used by Luke, wind and fire, but the operable one here 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.

Today, the Day of Pentecost in the church, we celebrate the Luken 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 beyond the barriers of 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 of the people of God....beginning with Adam...through the patriarchs and Moses, the judges, 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 this...but I think there is something more...perhaps there is a way here to speak of this mysterious Spirit as something more than other...the Spirit, the Shekinah in Hebrew...which means God's indwelling...so let's look at the story in context:

There are two things that I think are key 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...ethnos, in the Greek...the story of the woman at the well, a Canaanite, a symbol of the despised other...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 face 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, 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....so the xenophobic tension rears its head in spades....the notion of stranger, of difference...still at issue, as it is for us....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....language the imaginative art by

which we reveal the essence of who we are, which points to 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...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 vibrations, through the senses....we can feel words like wind and fire, annunciated 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...and 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....At each uttered word there is critical mass for renaissance...imagination born anew.

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.

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 loves....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...words of passion in the mother tongue that resound with all truth;....Words bear the Spirit.... As real as wind and fire.

So according to Luke the Spirit is not some other worldly creature aloof in the ether...or hiding in a church sacristy....but Spirit among us, enfleshed anew with every new breath uttered....words spoken and unspoken...all utterances of the imagination... Spirit which binds in sacred hospitality....binds us as human community, spirit that teaches us with resonant words we know to be the truth...words that resonate of the

beginning...words, old friends that evoke memory and passion...and words that wonderfully welcome and claim us in the warmth of welcome, the community Randy will join this day...words, these signs of the imagination set loose... beautiful in its appearing...and 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, with all grace and truth...until the end of time, when there will no longer be need for words...no need for words? I can't imagine that.