

## Capable of Communion

Acts 2: 1-21

Pentecost Sunday, (June 12) 2011

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I love the scene in the 1995 romantic comedy movie *The American President*, starring Michael Douglas as the president, whose wife died a few years previously, and Annette Benning as the woman he's beginning to date. The scene is a formal state dinner welcoming the president of France and his wife. Everyone is beautifully and formally dressed, there is music in the background, and at the table there is conversation among the Americans while the president of France and his wife sit there staring at their food saying nothing. It is obvious that they are bored, and feeling left out. The Annette Benning character, notices their discomfort, and begins to speak fluent French to the French couple. In a moment, everything is transformed, the French couple is included, the mood at the table is lightened, and the evening becomes a success, and by implication, the relations between the United States and France are for the better, all because someone knew how to speak someone else's language.

Many of us here have recently experienced some of the barriers and challenges in not being able to speak someone else's language in our encounters with the Burmese people. Only through the few Burmese who speak English are we able to communicate and attempt to help these refugees feel at home. But without speaking their language ourselves, we are limited in how well we can do that.

It can be difficult to communicate with people who are from different places or who speak different languages. It is often difficult enough to communicate with people who live across the street or with those who sit at our dinner table. It is difficult to speak with anyone if we must do so across any kind of barrier.

Our world is made up of barriers, obstacles, divisions, boundaries, brokenness, fragmentation, and differences. National boundaries, racial and ethnic differences, broken relationships, wars, feuds, disagreements, anger between spouses, mistrust between parents and children, festering grievances between colleagues, disappointment between friends, impatience with those of another generation, or unkind words spoken between neighbors. And of course, there is a babel of languages where it is rare for anyone to speak or hear in ways where the other is truly understood.

But the Bible tells us that we are made for communion, relationship, fellowship: communion with God, with each other, with others, and with all God's creation. It is for communion that we were originally created and it is in full and deep communion that we will eventually end up with God and with one another. That is the Gospel. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that in him all that separates us and divides us is passing away and a New Creation has begun. In this New Creation we are reconciled and made one. In Christ we discover that we are members, we are in community, and we are to be witnesses, showing the wider world that peace and reconciliation is the Way.

The book of Acts is the story of how that begins to happen after the ascension of Jesus. Jesus final instructions to his disciples before he ascended, was to go back to Jerusalem and wait and pray. So back to Jerusalem the eleven

disciples went. Matthias joined them as the new 12<sup>th</sup> disciple and for the next week they waited and prayed.

We pick up our story today in Acts 2 where Luke tells us that it is Pentecost, one of the biggest Jewish festivals and Jews from all over the known world have gathered in the Holy City. The wider group of disciples are praying and waiting and all of a sudden there is a mighty rushing wind, and something like fire appears over everyone. At the same time, they all are able to speak and hear one another in each other's languages.

Bystanders think all these people must have been drinking early in the day, but Peter stands up and begins to tell the story of Jesus and three thousand people come to believe that Jesus is the Christ and are added to the membership of the very first Christian congregation. Whatever their differences, and there were probably many, the Holy Spirit drew these disparate people together and made them one in faith. The gospel story is revealed to be a universal tale of redemption, one that communicates beyond human barriers. By the end of Acts 2 and 4 we get a picture of the how this early church was sharing a life of communion.

This is how Acts begins and it never lets up. If you read onward in the book, you will see that soon the Holy Spirit is leading, pushing, pulling, dragging, these first apostles into sharing this story of redemption and reconciliation with all sorts of people: God-fearers like the Ethiopian eunuch. God-fearers were those who were not Jews but believed in Yahweh, and wanted to worship with the Jews. But the Holy Spirit leads Philip to share with this Ethiopian God-fearer, and he is baptized and included in the membership of God's New Creation. Not long after that, the Holy Spirit includes Samaritans and outright Gentiles, like the Roman officer Cornelius. And on and on, the Holy Spirit cajoles and pushes and drags the

early church in going to people they never dreamed were to be included in God's New Creation. It's a remarkable story and one that continues to this day.

And it all started on Pentecost, when the Spirit came and empowered them to speak and hear in each other's languages.

When we stop and think about we realize that this is no small thing. Those of you here who speak another language know that to be reasonably fluent, means also to think differently.

I'm sorry to say that I do not speak another language but I have studied the ancient languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. And although I'm very rusty today, I clearly recall my experience of learning Hebrew. Of the languages I studied, Hebrew was the most different. It reads from the right to the left unlike English, Greek, and Latin, and it is a primitive language, one that puts a premium on context and interpretation. I was about halfway through the intensive class in Hebrew that I was taking, when I began to think differently. Knowing another language helps us see differently and think differently and I began to have dreams where Hebrew was being spoken.

At Pentecost, because of the Holy Spirit, when these people began to speak and hear in each other's languages, they also began to change their point of view. No longer seeing everyone else from their own point of view, they began to see from the other's point of view. They spoke from the other's perspective and they had the vision and outlook of the other.

The Apostle Paul said later, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." After Pentecost, those early Christians were beginning to learn to say, "It

is no longer I who live, but Christ and others – their needs, their joys, their hopes, and their cares – who live in me.”

Part of the work of the Holy Spirit, is to empower us to go outside of ourselves and meet, listen and understand others, and learn to receive others as gifts of God, so we might all share life in communion and peace and joy.

Much of what we are to do here at Austin Heights is to raise and train our children to be **capable of communion**, capable of entering into and seeing the importance of true and real community. Our children will not learn that true communion is desired, that it is essential to being Christian, and it is what we’ll all know someday in God’s presence, unless we teach it to them and train them in how to act toward others. Here, the Spirit of the Living God is at work cultivating in us the ability to be open to one another, to receive others who are different, to listen to them and seek to understand one another. We want to train our children and young people, as well as practice ourselves, the language skills of being Christian.

Christian discipleship is like learning a new language. Our children mimic what they see and hear and eventually they learn the more formal aspects like grammar, syntax, and punctuation; like forgiveness, servanthood, and loving the unloved. All of us are always learning, working on our verbs, learning to pray, making sure we speak with clarity, finding ways to serve. In so doing we’re being changed and becoming Christ’s body.

Carlyle Marney, the great Baptist preacher, who was pastor of FBC Austin in the 1950’s and Myers Park Baptist in Charlotte, NC in the 60’s, once was in Korea on a speaking tour to U.S. soldiers. One day he met an elderly Catholic priest who was Korean. The Korean could not speak English and Marney could

not speak Korean. Suddenly Marney's seminary work came back to him. He turned to the priest and said, "Dominus vobiscum" (The Lord be with You.). The priest's face lit up and he immediately responded with "Et cum spiritu tuo" (And also with you.). Marney said, "Sursum corda" (Lift up your hearts.). And the priest responded, "Habemus ad Dominum" (We lift them up to the Lord.)

Here was the language of the liturgy that dated as far back as the third century which enabled these two Christians from different cultures, to greet each other as brothers.

Here was the work of the Holy Spirit, transcending centuries and oceans and cultures, so that we all might know that we are one in Christ.

Amen and amen.