

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Spirit of the Living God, amen.

Today is the Sunday of Pentecost. I know most of you already know this because you are wearing red. Yet, I wonder how many of us really understand the significance of this day in the Church Calendar. Fifty days after Passover, Jews kept the Pentecost festival, which originally celebrated the wheat harvest, but had become the commemoration of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. It was one of the largest celebrations of the Jewish calendar. It's estimated Jerusalem's population swelled to two or three times the normal population. The Jewish people had celebrated this day as a harvest festival and pilgrims from every nation came to offer the first fruits of their harvest at the temple. For Christians, Pentecost marks the fiftieth day of Easter. Christians maintained the festival of Pentecost from their Jewish roots, but altered its focus to a celebration of the Spirit of the risen Christ in the church. Some say Pentecost marks the birthday of the Church, but God's people have been gathering together almost since the beginning of creation. The gathering of God's people is nothing new. Well, what about the pouring out of God's Holy Spirit upon those gathered in Jerusalem? We might be getting a little closer to the meaning of this very special day... I think the real significance of Pentecost is that on this day God's people gathered together, filled with the Holy Spirit, began to talk about what God had been doing all throughout history.

God talk can be difficult to get right, even among professionals. A priest and a Lutheran pastor from two local churches were standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that read, “The End Is Near! Turn yourself around before it’s too late!” They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car. The first driver sped by and yelled, “Leave us alone you religious nuts!” From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big splash. The priest turned to the Lutheran Pastor and said, “Do you think we should change the sign to just say, ‘Bridge Out’?” God talk is hard, even for professionals...

On the day of Pentecost, the church began to talk. In a sense, they talked about the old bridge being out, but pointed the way to a new bridge, Jesus Christ. In today’s Acts reading, we discover the apostles “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” The international gathering of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, in town for the festival of Pentecost was bewildered by this, “because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.”

Using a variety of tongues, the apostles started to talk publicly about “God’s deeds of power.” I want you to listen to the voice of Peter from our Acts reading this morning. This is the same Peter, who had denied Jesus just a few weeks earlier, not once or twice, but the totality of rejection, the trifecta of betrayal, Peter even cursed, swearing he did not know the man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. That

Peter, raised his voice and boldly proclaimed that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord (Jesus Christ) shall be saved.” Peter could boldly proclaim that truth because he had experienced the love and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ personally. His betrayal had been wiped out completely by Jesus through his death and resurrection.

On Pentecost, the silence of the church was broken. With the help of the Holy Spirit, church members, even the unlikely Peter, talked openly about God’s deeds of power and about the salvation offered by Jesus. Many who heard this message “were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added” to the Christian community (Acts 2:41). The words spoken by Peter and the other apostles were inspirational, and they sparked the explosive growth of the Jerusalem church. Then, as now, God-talk has the power to change lives.

Have God’s people lost their voice some 2000 years after this great language breakthrough? In The New York Times (October 13, 2018), religion writer Jonathan Merritt reports it’s getting harder and harder to talk about God. Although more than 70 percent of us in the United States identify as Christian, most of us don’t feel comfortable speaking about our faith. According to a recent Barna survey, more than three-quarters of Americans do not often have spiritual or religious conversations. Six in 10 say they have spiritual conversations only on rare occasions. A meager 7 percent of Americans say that they talk about spiritual

matters regularly. Seven percent! What if only 7 percent of the apostles had spoken up? The day of Pentecost might have been a dud. My own experience tells me these studies are pretty accurate. My confirmation students over the years tell me they rarely have religious conversations with their parents and other relatives. Most suggest their families don't even pray together, not even grace before meals. If that's true among families going through the learning experience of Catechism, I worry about the state of families who don't have that added incentive of making an example for their confirmation student... According to the Barna Survey and other surveys, practicing Christians who attend church regularly don't do much better than the general population. Only 13 percent of these people have a spiritual conversation about once a week.

So why do we struggle so badly with God talk? Well, for one thing, work often takes precedence over worship, social lives are prioritized over spiritual disciplines, and far too many people save their Sunday-best for Monday through Friday. Americans also feel conflicted about talking openly about their faith. The Barna survey reveals many people believe spiritual conversations create tension or arguments. Some are also concerned by the trend to politicize religion. A smaller number don't do God talk because they don't want to appear religious, sound weird or seem extremist.

What can we do to feel more comfortable talking about God even with our family and friends? The apostle Paul gives us some guidance in his letter to the Romans, which he wrote to his fellow followers of Jesus in the capital of the Roman Empire. He knew spiritual conversations could create tensions and arguments, and he was aware Christians in Rome could come across as weird and extremist. So, the language he uses is very carefully chosen. Like Paul, we need to be careful with the language we use in conversations about faith. If you ask someone with no church experience what it means to “feel called,” they might think you’re “referring to the phone vibrating in their pocket.” Also, some “Church” words and phrases we all understand and take for granted are confusing to people who weren’t raised in the Church. For example, being saved “by the blood of the Lamb” or giving your “tithes and offerings” are religious jargon that can be mystifying to people outside the church. Fortunately, Paul doesn’t make such mistakes in his God talk to the Romans. Not only is he careful with the language he uses, but he also talks about values, not Church dogma. Paul speaks clearly about life in God’s family when he writes, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” Paul says we’re children of God when we allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us away from self-centered living and toward God-centered living. We want God to shape our actions, attitudes and values.

So, what does this mean? Paul says elsewhere in Romans we should “let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Love, mutual affection, honor, zeal, hope, perseverance and hospitality; these words aren’t confusing. They can be spoken and understood by anyone, inside or outside the church. All are marks of a true Christian, seen in the life of a person who is led by the Spirit of God into the family of God. Most people will discuss what they value and what they deem important in life. Dogma and theology can come later. I’m reminded here of the words attributed to Saint Augustine, Preach the Gospel always, use words when necessary. Also, the words of one of our favorite Christian hymns, “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

May God’s Holy Spirit pour out on the Church today and open our mouths to talk about God using both our actions and our words in ways that show God loves the world and was willing to die for this world. May God’s spirit loosen our tongues to do some God-Talk of our own. May God help us deepen our spiritual discussions with those closest to us and may the words of our mouths always give glory and honor to our lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.