

Sermon Title: Last Words, First Words
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21
Preacher: Grace Boyer
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In the two Sundays leading up to Pentecost we heard stories about Jesus' last or final words to his disciples. Words from John 14, saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." "I will not leave you orphaned." "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (John 14:1, 18, 27) Or words last Sunday as Jesus spoke to his disciples before his ascension saying, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

So two weeks ago in the children's message video, to get at this, we discussed, "What are the last things, final things, we say to family before going to bed? Or to grandparents or friends before hanging up the phone or video call?" And how does that change when we know we won't see or talk to them for a long time. Maybe we intentionally say "I love you" or "I'll miss you."

As adults we also remember the things we wish we had said, or are glad that we did say. Maybe last words to a dying loved one. Or advice to children heading off to college. Or phrases Grandparents or favorite relatives shared with us, that we find ourselves repeating and passing on down the generations. Or perhaps it isn't words, but things we do to embody love in that farewell: the car's oil and tire pressure checked, the muffins cooked, the \$20 placed in a hand for gas money, the eyes filled with love.

Jesus's last words and final actions, were full of love, compassion, reassurance and empowerment to his friends, his disciples. Telling them God's Spirit would come and give them words to witness to "God's deeds of power" in the world.

So today, on Pentecost, the disciples are no longer about last words or final advice, but first words. First words on this "birth" day of the church. First words spoken into their new reality. The disciples were grasping for these words at first, babbling like infants, learning to speak.

So last Sunday, on a Zoom call with the children, we asked, what were some of the first words they had learned to speak, or read, or sign? Answers included mom, dad, ball, kitty cat, thank you, shoes, nocturnal. One of our grandchild's first words was "bird". She had heard the sound of birds and seen them outside, seen them in her story books that we read, and she put it all together. Helen Keller's iconic first word is "water", as she takes the feeling of the water at the pump, and the finger signing of her teacher and it finally clicks what the word means.

For the disciples, as they told the story of Pentecost and as the writer of Acts wrote it down...As they tried to describe the indescribable experience of the God's presence on Pentecost they went back to words from their familiar stories. The story in Genesis of the Spirit of God blowing like a wind over the waters. The story in Ezekiel where God's presence was described as a powerful windstorm. The story of the burning bush engulfed in flames without burning when God spoke to Moses. The story of God leading the Israelites to safety by a pillar of fire in the wilderness. Sounds of rushing wind, tongues as of fire, images to communicate what they had experienced.

But whatever this windy, fiery presence of the Holy Spirit looked or sounded like, it gave them ability to speak in the native languages of devout Jews from every land living in Jerusalem. It gave them courage to go into the world. And it gave Peter wisdom and clarity to share the words of the OT prophet Joel, that God's Spirit would be poured out on sons, daughters, men, women, young, old, enslaved and free alike in this new reality they found themselves in.

I find myself identifying with the first part of the disciples story, the first part. And hoping, wishing, praying for the second. What I mean is that I find myself identifying with the disciples as they gather in that house together, reflecting on the words Jesus had taught them, waiting and fearful but drawing strength from community. Perhaps getting tired of waiting. Perhaps wishing they could go back to their normal routines, to the days when they fished on the Sea of Galilee, before they met Jesus. Not sure they had the skill set or were ready for this new reality they found themselves in. That pretty much sums up my psychological experience of Covid-19.

My hope, my prayer is for the second part of the story, when the Spirit envelopes them in love and power. And once the unexpected chaos of new languages subsides, there is the courage, the clarity, and the understanding that Peter speaks to their new reality.

Retired Biblical professor, Herman Waetjen, speaks of this moment of empowerment. He says that some Roman coins of the time had Caesar's head on them, and above the head were divided flames or tongues of fire to proclaim that Caesar was god's son, that he was divine or royal. That the writer of Acts intentionally used the phrase, "divided tongues, as of fire" as a way of saying the disciples were God's children, the royal priesthood. That at that moment they were claimed and empowered.

Church, we are in a Pentecost moment. Through the waters of baptism or the welcoming of the family of faith we have already been claimed as God's children, we don't need "divided tongues, as of fire" to show up. The Spirit is already here!

I don't know what new words the Spirit will give us to speak this time. But I do know that the "old, old, story" of God's love, Jesus's teachings, and the Spirit's empowering presence is needed now more than ever, even if the words we use to communicate them change.

Two years ago our children learned the chorus to a song by singer songwriter Steve Angrisano:

"Go make a difference, We can make a difference. Go make a difference in the world."
I have been thinking about this song as I looked at this scripture text.

The verses speak about being light and salt, hands of Christ, face of God, spirit of hope and voice of peace. The song reminds me of Jesus's words when he says the power of the Spirit will come upon the disciples and they will be witnesses to Judea, Samaria, and throughout the world. The song reminds me of the disciple's empowering experience of Pentecost.

So how do we "Go make a difference" and witness in this time of restricted movement? In this Pentecost moment?

We can start with the 6 foot circle around us. Start with looking inside, and inviting God's Spirit to be at work within our own hearts, minds, bodies, spirits. See if by cultivating God's peace inside of us, we can bring peace to those around us. That 6 feet circle could be the family members we live with or facetime with, or family pets. It could be 6 feet in our home, as we cook, text, write cards, homeschool, zoom, or telework. It could be 6 feet of garden space in our yard or at the community garden. It could be the birds or animals we see on our walks, or the neighbors that come close to our 6 feet bubble on the sidewalks, the grocery stores, or post offices. Or those that come into the places where we have continue to go to work each day. We can choose to allow the Spirit to make a difference in our 6 foot sphere of influence.

And by combining our efforts through the church, we expand that circle by continuing to support the local ministries that help the homeless, the hungry, the hurting. Some of you are specifically involved in feeding hungry college students, feeding the women of RITI, Meals on Wheels, SVCM, ABCCM or AHOPE. Through food, funds, and driving you are making a difference in this world.

*Go make a difference, We can make a difference. Go make a difference in the world.
Go make a difference. We can make a difference. Go make a difference in the world.*

With the life giving, hope empowering help of the Holy Spirit may it be so. Because it is precisely in confusing times and new realities that the Holy Spirit works best.