

9.17.23 – Pentecost 16

“Words Make a Difference”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Numbers 11:24-30 (NLT)

²⁴ So Moses went out and reported the Lord’s words to the people. He gathered the seventy elders and stationed them around the Tabernacle. ²⁵ And the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. Then he gave the seventy elders the same Spirit that was upon Moses. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But this never happened again.

²⁶ Two men, Eldad and Medad, had stayed behind in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but they had not gone out to the Tabernacle. Yet the Spirit rested upon them as well, so they prophesied there in the camp. ²⁷ A young man ran and reported to Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!”

²⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ assistant since his youth, protested, “Moses, my master, make them stop!”

²⁹ But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all!” ³⁰ Then Moses returned to the camp with the elders of Israel.

Leader: This is the Word of God for the People of God! All: Thanks be to God!

Acts 2:1-12 (NRSVue)

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Leader: These Words Are from The Holy Spirit! All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, thank you for the opportunity to consider words this morning, both yours and ours. We recognize that our wants and needs are often placed in a higher priority than others’, and we seek your forgiveness. We recognize too that our words are not always pleasant; they may not edify others but rather contain envy or spite.

We seek healing for the emotions that we cannot control. On this day we ask you to fill us with proverbial new wine, new words, new spirit, so that we may worship and praise you, while sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Fill us with your Holy Spirit; renew us oh Lord as we hear your Words and your voice as you speak through mine. Amen.

Last week we examined blame, suffering, and joy, looking at the more positive aspects that our faith can provide. After our interesting summer, we transition back from August's healing topic to the year's theme of divine experiments, strengthening and renewing our Christlike attitudes and faith. This week we observe God's people in a difficult experiment, going back through the desert toward Jerusalem after exile in Egypt for many years. The human nature filled with fearful doubt, disappointment, and bitterness had taken hold; in Numbers 11, we find a murmuring, complaining, and back-stabbing group of followers.

The people were tired of eating manna in the wilderness and had begun to crave not only meat (which the Lord did provide through quail), but also the pagan and sinful lifestyle of Egypt. Moses had had enough, so went to the Lord for counsel. He could not control the behavior of over 600,000 disgruntled people, so the Lord created an organizational deacon structure for his burdensome leadership. Moses chose seventy (70) men and placed them before the Lord at the tabernacle, ready to receive God's grace. They received God's power and began to prophesy before the people, praising God, preaching, and praying near the tent of meeting, the normal place for worship.

Meanwhile, two of the men chosen had not gone, and were still in the camp and not the tabernacle. A young lad informed Moses that "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp (Numbers 11:27b)!" They had received

the Spirit also, and Joshua (possibly one of the seventy) was not too happy about that, preferring control and maybe unity in leadership. But Moses saw the jealousy in his remarks and corrected him by saying: “I wish that **all the Lord’s people were prophets** and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all (Numbers 11:29b)!”

Then with the newly ordained Elders, Moses returned to the camp, and the elders administered well, giving Moses the time to envision, disciple, and encourage new leadership among the followers. These words and the words prophesied by the new leadership had deep meaning for the people, but their ears were stopped up for a bit, and they couldn’t hear. Words of jealousy and ambition (like Joshua’s) are not words of edification or from God; sin had permeated the camp temporarily, but God’s power and grace prevailed.

We too are surrounded by a culture of warring words and ideas, so sometimes it is difficult to hear and receive the beneficial words of vision and prophecy. On this day as we study the power at Pentecost, let us remember that although we are a small congregation, we are many leaders with the grace of wisdom and spiritual maturity. We can set the example of using God’s heavenly words and vision to others in our circles and beyond our circles (rather than the degrading cultural diatribe heard in the media, social media, and on the streets). A few words of stewardship, love, and ministry can encourage one who has gone astray (perhaps even in our own families).

Remember that I was not with you this year at Pentecost at the end of May, so I decided to revisit the sermon planning I had done for May, June, and July. Pentecost, as you recall, is fifty (50) days from the Feast

of First Fruits (meaning first harvest in the Old Testament) or for us Christians, 50 days from Easter. The disciples who had not fled after the crucifixion returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives to an upstairs room where they had been staying; Peter was teaching and preaching to about 120 followers according to Acts 1:15. It is to this group that a sound like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven fell on all who were in the house. Some say God's purpose of violence in the wind on this day was to overtake the minds and hearts of the men as a transformational and supernatural event. Those who witnessed the visible tongues of fire fall on the apostles individually saw an outward sensible sign which confirmed the faith of the apostles, unlike the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. Many times, in the Bible we see how God uses words and communication to transform his people.

Like the prophecy of Moses' elders, it was another supernatural experience that improved communication and faith among God's people. At Pentecost, they were all filled with the words of the Holy Spirit, and all understood each other, despite their countries of origin as listed. What did they say? I am sure they did not discuss the weather or errands as we so often do in conversation; but instead, they uttered praises and the characteristics of an awesome God. Most were bilingual, able to speak both Greek and their language of origin; so, they were shocked to hear Jews speaking other languages from around the Mediterranean. Yet they could understand them all, as if in their own language! It was probably a terrifying yet unifying experience since they could understand one another sharing and agreeing upon the wonders of God. Their local dialects did not seem to matter.

How wonderful this would be in our international urban area? Or even just in our families? Sometimes words are used more like weapons to hurt or maim others and even ourselves. Negative self-talk is just as damaging as criticizing others. As I was looking for a commentary on Acts, I pulled out a colleague's weekly devotional book, "Vantage Point" by Danielle L. Bridgeforth, the pastor of Clarendon Baptist Church, given to me at Installation. The chapter the bookmark fell open to was "The Power of Words," truly a *Kairos* moment as the Holy Spirit led my direction. She writes: "Words either kill or they give life; and the choice as to what will be the effect of my words is all mine."

Joshua had a choice but spoke before he pondered the effect of his words. His words proved he was filled with sin and pride and had to repent. The apostles in the upper room were filled with fear that prevented them from testifying to the Resurrection; God intervened with the promised Holy Spirit to change their hearts, minds, and words. We often speak hastily out of anger, fear, or frustration; might we instead submit our tongues to God, and speak words of love, courage, and hopefulness? If the Spirit could supernaturally improve the elders' and the apostles' communications (speaking only the good about God rather than the negative about man), couldn't the Holy Spirit influence our communications with the rest of the world? I'm preaching to the choir here, because I only hear good from you; but I know better! In the dark of my room or the stress of the day, I may say unkind words that should not be said. How about you? Can we use this Pentecost celebration to remind ourselves to be open to the Spirit's words and direction? Can we give up envy and strife? Can we set an example for others of positive thoughts

and language? I hope we can; as Christ-followers, we **must!** Words have meaning and power. Remember that this week and next as you go about your days. Let the Spirit in! Amen? Amen! //

Please pray with me. Merciful God, we thank you for this reminder and course correction. Let us use the Elders' and Pentecost examples to reset our communications. Let us speak only the good things of you; let us testify to your grace and love. Thank you for your transformative Holy Spirit; fill us with it today and always, for it is in your Son Jesus' name that we pray and dedicate our lives. **Amen.**