

*The Miracle of Hearing*

June 12, 2011 Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

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How good is your hearing? I wonder how many problems show up in our world—employers and employees, husbands and wives, Democrats and Republicans—because we have trouble hearing each other?

When my son Erik was 11-years-old, we went for a bike ride one evening. We were having a good time pedaling around the neighborhood. And then we started talking to each other.. He was in early adolescence, forming definite opinions, increasingly challenging his parents. As the bike ride went on, we had one of those conversations that was a real eye-opener for me. I felt some of my control as a parent slipping away. I didn't like it. At one point I said rather forcefully, "Erik, remember, I am the parent. You are the child. Do you know what that means?" Erik paused for a moment, shrugged, and responded with a bit of an attitude: "Dad, you bore me."

Let's just say, if Erik was trying to push my buttons just then, it worked. I turned my bike around faster than ice cream melts on a 100-degree day. We were going home and we were going to talk about this...now!

"Erik, why would you say that to me? It's disrespectful." Silence. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?" More silence. Finally, with a mixture of hurt and bewilderment in his eyes, Erik responded, "Dad, you asked me what it means that you are the parent. So I answered, "You bore me. You...gave birth to me." Right then I felt about two feet tall. I'd completely misunderstood what my son was saying. And I'd ruined a perfectly good bike ride. All because of poor hearing.

Good hearing can be hard to come by in our world. Turn on a TV talk show and you'll probably find people shouting at each other, much to the delight of a cheering audience. Tune in to the state legislature and you're likely to see plenty of people posturing for the camera, but very few actually talking to each other. Sit down to a family dinner and sometimes, instead of catching up on the day's events, you end up in a heated argument.

So what do we do? Is there a remedy for people with hearing problems? I think so. It's called Pentecost. Pentecost is God's gift to help us to hear better.

The setting is 50 days after Passover. Jews from around the world are in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. They're celebrating the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. Picture the scene: the whole world gathered in one place; a babbling confusion of languages; people wondering how they're ever going to hear each other.

While all this is going on, the followers of Jesus are huddled in the upper room. Their lives are on hold. Before Jesus ascends to heaven, he tells them to wait for "power from on high." What that means, they don't know. So they go to the upper room and lock the doors. They're worried that they might suffer the same fate as Jesus.

But wait! Listen! A gentle breeze begins to blow. Then it's blowing a little harder. Pretty soon it's a gust. Suddenly there's the rush of a violent wind, a swelling of voices, a shaking of the foundations. The Spirit of God descends and begins to work. In the blink of an eye, the doors of the upper room are burst open. And the frightened followers of Jesus are pushed out onto the street with newfound boldness.

What's going on? The miracle of Pentecost is not simply that the disciples can suddenly speak in foreign languages. No, as I see it, it's equally miraculous that the scattered people of God are able to hear it. They hear Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, say, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." They hear him say: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." They hear: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." And somehow they're able to understand that Peter is talking to them. And they take it to heart. And most incredible of all, many of them come to believe that the one they call "Lord" is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified and raised from the dead.

Amazing! On the day of Pentecost, God's sends the Holy Spirit to help God's people hear. And in that hearing, a church is born. Hearts get changed. Doors get opened. And the church is given a mission they did not have before: to share the good news of Jesus' love with a world in need.

Now, be sure to notice what *doesn't* happen on Pentecost. *The Spirit doesn't come to solve all our problems. Instead it creates new ones.* Think about it: if the Holy Spirit hadn't come, the disciples would have gone home. I can almost hear James and John saying, "The last three years sure were a wild and crazy ride, and Jesus was a great

guy, but it's probably time to head back to Galilee and take care of dad's fishing business."

Once the Spirit shows up, however, there's no turning back. The Spirit has a way of pushing shy, huddling believers out into the world. That's where the real action is. The Spirit prompts us to look around at our neighborhoods and ask, *Who needs us? What do we have to offer? What are we passionate about doing?* The answers to these questions will give us a mission we did not have before.

It all starts with hearing...and listening...and responding to the "problems" the Spirit creates for us. This year we've been working on *creating a place for all to belong*. The more we've focused on it, the more problems and opportunities God seems to send our way: Two-minute connections in which we bump into some of the most interesting people. Families needing temporary housing through Interfaith Hospitality. School children having food for the weekend through the backpack program. People from all over the world seeking treatment at the Mayo Clinic, and some of them showing up for worship at Zumbro. Neighborhood kids and their parents coming to the Bike Fair last Sunday. I could go on and on. Once we stop to listen, it seems, God has any number of people to send our way.

A man named Atan Farah showed up in my office on Friday. As these things often go, I was just sitting down to start work on my Pentecost sermon. Doesn't God know better than to interrupt me during my sermon writing? The man was dressed in a light green robe. His English was definitely a work in progress, but I did my best to piece together his story. He was originally from Somalia or Kenya. He'd come to Denver four years ago, sponsored by a Lutheran church. After Denver he went to Owatonna, then to Rochester. Now he was looking for help in getting reconnected with his children back in Africa. Because of his struggle with English, he asked if we could be of assistance in filling out the visas, at least that's what I think he was asking. Atan shared that when he left Denver, his sponsoring congregation had told him, "No matter where you travel, just go to a Lutheran church. They'll be glad to help."

Well, I have to confess, I was having a hard time "hearing" Atan. One reason was because of his broken English. Another was because I was preoccupied with my sermon. Atan could sense I was getting impatient. So he called up a friend on his cell phone. The

two of us passed the phone back and forth until the story began to make more sense. Somewhere along the way, I think, Pentecost broke in. I *heard* him. This felt like something we should do. So with Annette's help in the office, we looked up the phone number for immigration services. We tried the number but weren't able to get through. I told Atan to come back next week and we'd try it again.

Isn't that the way the Spirit often works? We have a mission opportunity right in front of us. It could be anything from assisting with a visa application, to helping an elderly neighbor clean out a gutter, to bringing a casserole to a friend who's lost a loved one. Here's the deal: These kinds of opportunities are almost always an interruption. They're almost never convenient. We're usually not sure what we're getting into. Still, if we're listening, the nudge of the Spirit will go something like this: "I could use somebody like you. What do you say—what to help? Remember, I didn't come to solve all your problems, but instead to create some new ones."

As we follow the lead of the Spirit, we do the work of the church. Keep in mind: we're going to make plenty of mistakes along the way. Being the church is inherently messy. Ever since Pentecost, there's no one right way to try to reach people for Jesus. We have to experiment. Some things will work better than others. Sometimes we'll have disagreements. Sometimes, when our plate is full, we'll have to say *no*. Sometimes we might even experience failure. Still, if the cross teaches us anything, it teaches that success will not always look like success. In the end, the question really isn't whether we've been successful, but whether we've been faithful.

Friends, we live in a world in which good hearing is in short supply. Sometimes we're the ones whose hearing is challenged. So the Spirit comes at Pentecost to help us hear better. The Spirit comes to unlock our doors and send us out into the world, because that's where the real action is. The Spirit comes to give us a mission and a purpose. "I could use somebody like you," says the Spirit, "What do you say—want to help? How you answer that question will make all the difference in the world. Amen.