

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost
Texts: Acts 2:1-11
I Corinthians 12:4-13
John 20:19-23

I have made the decision this morning to do something fairly uncommon, and some might contend, risky: which is to speak from the pulpit about a parishioner by name. I have chosen to do this, prompted by Paul's comments about the church being the body of Christ, because life is not lived in general. It is lived in specificity and we know it best in specificity. And sometimes we can speak honestly only by acknowledging this with the claim that such notice is worthy. What we have received and who we are as a church depends on persons who have proper names, and this morning, I'd like to honor this.

This past Friday, I went to see Earle Dane, who is now a resident of a local nursing home. For many years, Earle was a vibrant member of this church, who gave generously of his whole person on behalf of the mission of the parish. Some of you might remember him well. He was a graduate of Brown University, bright and able to be unusually insightful. He had a way of lighting up in conversation. His eyes would sparkle with every note of discovery and with the sheer delight of sharing something of the world with someone else. A few years ago, a stroke severely crippled him, and, as strokes often do, it stole from him that exquisite capacity we have to be free and easy in thought and word. It was as if a thick veil had been hung between Earle and the world, scrambling whatever passed through into various waves of confusion.

I went to see him because this is part of ministry, visiting not just prisoners, as the Gospels instruct us, but friends who have been imprisoned by debilitating events. Sometimes such visits offer little more than the hard reminder that we are all vulnerable: in the midst of life we can lose much of what, at root, we take life to be. As much as ministers hope to give witness to the grace of God, just as much we are called to be witnesses to the tragedies that afflict us without fixes, when we have no resolutions in our own hands.

Nursing homes are difficult but necessary places. When I arrived, Earle was seated in a wheelchair near the central nurses station, seemingly adrift in the hour and adrift in the day. I called out his name from several feet away, and he immediately turned with the surprise of recognition. His whole demeanor changed. His eyes twinkled, and as I took his hand, he squeezed mine, firm and sure. I pushed him in his wheelchair back to his room where we could have less distraction and more privacy, and for more than an hour he talked to me.

I don't have any idea what he said. I could make out very few of his words. And he had no less perception of his own struggles. At times, he searched for words so hard that his whole body showed the effort. Periodically, he finished only by leaning forward or back saying with ironic clarity: "I don't know." Yet just as quickly, without any prompt, he began again, with another thought, another story, another remembrance, vivid in his eyes but muddled by his tongue. I sat close to him in order to catch whatever I could, a few shards, fragments of statements, loose words which neither he nor I could string together.

My frustration in listening was exceeded only by Earle's in trying to speak. But watching him was marvelous. Somehow, I had been a catalyst to an avalanche of memories, desires, and emotions. They could be read across his face, in an excitement that he expressed in the movements of his hands and the whole shift of his posture. Periodically, he smiled broadly, as if engulfed in a vision he could recover but not quite share. Several times, he was able to give me only the conclusion of what he had spent ten minutes trying to tell. With tears in his eyes he'd say suddenly, "That was the best... that was the best. And he was right.

He was right. As I watched Earle, I realized that I was deeply privileged here. I was privileged to watch someone try so arduously to find the words for the beauty of his own life. I was privileged to see the beauty of his effort when his words failed him. I was privileged because all his work was for me. He wanted so badly to offer me something of himself, and there is nothing more profoundly human or more deeply divine than this. It didn't matter that, after an hour, I still couldn't make any sense of what he said. It didn't matter. We couldn't laugh at a joke mutually understood. We couldn't shake our heads in agreement about troubles in the world. We couldn't engage in spirited disagreement, searching for the perfect riposte by which to quiet the other. But this didn't matter because what mattered more, it seemed in Earle, and, in watching him, it seemed to me, was the joy of our enduring all this difficulty in order to be persons and souls together.

As I left, I was so glad for this time, and I realized that Earle had provided for me, perhaps best of all, a poignant parable by which to understand this odd feast of Pentecost and what, at root, it conveys to us.

What is the delinquency cured today? What do the texts address, and why do we observe this day above so many others? It's easy, of course, and to some extent it's traditional too, to reduce the problem and the resolution to our own human differences in language. The reading from the book of Acts seems to lead the way. "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia": different nations, different tribes, different cultures, different customs, all of which result in contest and conflict. Different words create different lives, and the best of translations are still poor substitutes for sharing the same tongue. And so, centuries later, still divided by languages, we use the opportunity of Pentecost to imagine the possibility of bridging all these divisions by a generous sense of appreciation. No tongue is given dominance. Each is acknowledged. French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Farsi, Greek, Arabic, and even at the far margins, lowly Dutch: all are granted legitimacy, and together we are given reason to celebrate this diversity, with the hope that what we may achieve in the end is the peace of agreement. Our differences may either be embraced as fine variations on a theme, or they will be dissolved into a broader understanding. If we can work out our words, we trust, then our ideas will fall into line as well; and if our thoughts can be accepted widely enough, then our actions will be in concert too, and our conflicts will cease. We will be able to gain our salvation by a balance of tolerance and knowledge, if we are open enough and learned enough.

It's a lovely vision, but if you examine it closely, it soon becomes apparent that the feast is just a device and God has no intrinsic role. Pentecost is just the Christian tribe's way of echoing Rodney King's cry, "Why can't we all just get along?" And God is just a grand, but often problematic way of imagining human unity. This, however, is not the story; nor is this the story's hope. And the peace of our world in our time and in our terms is not the peace that Jesus breathed.

The profound delinquency we suffer is not the division of languages between us. It is more akin to our being stymied as if by a stroke. It is the crippling in us of the language of God, which constitutes the whole meaning of creation and existence. We find that here, in regard to God, we can only stammer out shards and fragments. From time to time, we are afforded a vivid sense of immeasurable goodness and the grandeur of life, but the words to grasp and describe it completely elude us. We can remember parts of our lives, past and gone, with such radiance that, even as memories, they seem able to momentarily pierce the heavy veil of change and absence and loss. But soon enough these moments drop away, unsecured. What we struggle to express is not an understanding of the nature of our world in the hope of agreement; it's rather, more centrally, our relationship with God and, in conjunction, God's relationship with us. The issue isn't knowledge; it's love. It's not getting things right.

It's being at home, or as the Scriptures state, it's living with the confidence that what lies before us, however distant or removed that seems, is the wholeness of seeing even God face to face, with nothing intervening, nothing set between us that disrupts and disturbs. It's the capacity to trust fully that we are now and forever enfolded within God's eternity.

Jesus' word to his disciples was not information, nor did he dispense a rule for how we should get along with one another. He didn't offer us enlightenment or instruction on how to make our way in the world. He didn't outline a strategy for peace. He breathed it. It came as his breath, his life, the promise of his presence. It's not our burden, therefore, to have to make sense of everything, correcting every jumble of confusion; the grace of our lives is that God has given his own word to us, finitely in the person of Jesus, and infinitely in the risen Christ and our inclusion in Christ's kingdom. It is not we who must first discern God; it is God who attends to us, no matter how stymied we are. This word, Jesus Christ, is the one universal. This is the word that can be heard regardless of our differences in language and life and time. This word is God's own that frees us from the pain of all our misspeaking and brokenness: it is God's tireless presence that rejoices in us. It is the word that has descended to us, and the word that lifts us, as if in suspension, toward heaven. And by the gift of God's spirit, it is the word we are given to share and to abide within. "Lo," said Jesus, "I am with you always." "I am with you always." "I am with you even to the end of the ages." That word is our uplifting.

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