

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Acts 2:1-21 Pentecost

May 27, 2007  
Rev. Robin Long

1When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

13Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

14Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17" 'In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams.  
18Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.  
19I will show wonders in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood and fire and billows of smoke.  
20The sun will be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood  
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.  
21And everyone who calls  
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

I'd been living in Luxembourg for about three weeks when I boarded a bus with my roommate. The bus driver began speaking to me in French and, having just started French lessons, I responded to him as I had been responding to native Luxembourgers since my arrival—"Vous ne parlez pas le français." My American roommate, who was fluent in French, began laughing. I got defensive—"What, I'm just telling him that I don't speak French." And she said, "No Robin, you just told him that *he* doesn't speak French." I'd been wandering around for days telling any poor monsuier who tried to strike up a conversation with me that *he* didn't speak French, talk about an ugly American.

Luxembourg has three official languages—French, German, and Luxembourgish. Wherever you go, you are inundated with the guttural undertones of German, the nasal resonance of French,

and the interesting mix of the two that is, essentially, Luxembourgish. Now you would think that in a country with three official languages there would be a lot of confusion, but they all seem to understand each other just fine.

But I have to say, the Luxembourgers have nothing on us when it comes to official languages, because though the Suttons Bay Congregational Church was the first English speaking congregation in the community, there are many languages spoken here. Sometimes it astounds me that we can understand each other at all. This reality hit home with me this past Monday when one of our veterans stopped by my office. Now, before I go any further, I must say that this sermon is not about the military, the war, patriotism, or nationalism. This sermon is about God and the different attitudes and perceptions of the various generations represented in our congregation and it just happens that a conversation about war and military service are what highlighted the differences. Enough said. Now back to the story. This veteran had served in WWII and was telling me how eager he and his buddies had been to get out of high school so they could go into the service. Now for someone my age, he was speaking another language. For most in my generation, military service is something to be avoided—something to be “gotten out of.” My generation, known as Generation X because of sociologists’ inability to otherwise categorize us, my generation also bears the legacy of our parents’ generation—the Baby Boomers. I grew up hearing stories about my dad’s friend Tom who did everything in his power to avoid being drafted into Vietnam. I also grew up with a vague awareness that my Dad served in the Army Reserves but other than knowing that we avoided driving through Missouri on family vacations because it reminded him of Fort Leonard Wood—I didn’t know much else. And so in my mind, military service was undesirable and to be avoided.

But as I talked with that veteran in my office on Monday afternoon, I began to realize that his generation’s language about the war had little to do with a position on war itself, nationalism, or even patriotism. I was speechless when he said, “No one wanted an F4 (which meant you couldn’t go to war.) No guy wanted another guy to have to go in his place.” Contrary to romantic illusions of war, the majority of these guys were not eager to dig themselves into trenches or kill the enemy or conquer the world in the name of freedom—these guys wanted to go because they knew if they didn’t go, someone else would have to. Now let me be clear again so that you can all relax, I am not condoning or condemning war or military service or nationalism or any of those things. I am talking about a totally different way of thinking about one’s place in the world. For many members of what Tom Brokaw has called, the Greatest Generation, you went to war because you didn’t want someone else to have to suffer in your place. For my generation, the emphasis is entirely different—for my generation the goal is to get out of doing things—to get out of doing just about anything we don’t want to do like jury duty, or paying a parking ticket, or having to call our mothers, or washing the dishes. We give very little consideration to the reality that if we do get out of it, someone else will have to get into it. We are Generation X, children of Baby Boomers, the original Me generation, and the personal autonomy with which our parents experimented, we have perfected.

And so, when a WW II veteran sat across from me and said he didn’t want to be F-4 because it would have meant that someone else had to go in his place, well you can imagine that I was just flummoxed. This is profound for me and, I would guess, for others in my generation. Friends, this is like speaking a whole different language. And after my conversation with this veteran I

sat in my office thinking—surely God is at work in this place if I can understand a word that he is saying and he can understand a word that I am saying because surely we're speaking different languages.

And that, friends, is the point of this morning's sermon. It's not about war or God bless America or any of that—it is about the reality that the Holy Spirit is still at work helping God's people to understand one another. If you're like me you often wonder, why don't the miracles and amazing things that happened in the Bible still happen today? But this congregation is witness to the reality that they do happen—they do still happen today, right now, here in this place, among all of us. Just as surely as the Holy Spirit came upon that first gathering of Christians so many years ago making it so folks from many places and languages could understand each other, so too has the Holy Spirit come upon us and made it so we can do the same, that we can understand each other.

God is not silent, God is not absent, God has not taken a hiatus. God is here among us, helping us to understand each other. God is here among us, sitting between the conscientious objector who spoke the language of peace making by refusing to bear arms and the seasoned war veteran who spoke the language of peace making by taking up arms. God is here among us, sitting between the young parent schooled in the language of food stamps and the seasoned retiree schooled in the language of investments and financial planning. God is here among us, sitting between the high school student speaking the language of independence and autonomy and her father speaking the language of accountability and responsibility. God is here among us, sitting between the heartbroken and overburdened caretaker and the carefree and jubilant vacationer. God is here among us—working with us, participating with us, sustaining us, and loving us. God is here—just as surely as God was there on that first Pentecost morning inviting us to share a life of faith.

And we do that not just by singing, praying, and praising God, we share our lives of faith and recognize the Spirit's presence in this place by gathering together for this holy meal, to which we have been invited by none other than Jesus Christ. Now if I had my druthers, we'd shut down Lincoln Street, line up a bunch of those long tables, and all sit around it together—passing the bread and juice down the sides of the table, serving each other, just as we do at a family dinner. Shoot, I'd even run in and invite those Lutherans to join us. But because they'd think I'm nuts and you'd just as soon stay in your pews, we'll settle for communion as usual and trust that God in God's infinite wisdom will lead us all to a place in our hearts and souls in which we understand that this is a holy family meal that brings us together, in spite of the many languages we speak, brings us together to a place of mutual understanding, appreciation, and celebration. Thanks be to God for the many languages spoken here and the opportunities we have to listen, and learn from each other, and grow with each other, and be the family of God.