

“You’re gonna’ get it!” “Nah nah-nah nah nah!” This seems to be an international children’s chant of derision. I’ve actually heard this in multiple languages. “Nah nah-nah nah nah!” “You’re gonna get it!” “You’re gonna loose!” “I’m smarter than you are!” And, of-course, you’ve heard the old saw, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Words will never hurt me. Really?... “You’re so stupid!” “What an ugly person you are!” “I hate you!” So, words will never hurt us??? Don’t kid yourself! There is great power in words, including the power to hurt, and hurt deeply.



Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Today is Pentecost. It’s all about the power of the word, specifically the power of the word of God. My goodness, but there is such a wealth of meaning in that phrase “the word of God”! It can mean so many things. The word of love and truth shared with each other and with the wider world by the followers of Jesus Christ – surely that is “the word of God.” And “the word of God” can certainly mean what you and I have the glorious freedom to read in Holy Scripture, the Bible. That’s the word of God, too. And of course, “the word of God” can also refer to **The** Word, who was in the beginning with the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ himself. **The** Word of God.

One of the things I love about the account of Pentecost Sunday is how clearly we can see the day of Pentecost as the reversal of the confusion and disaster wrapped up in the tower of Babel. You may remember that in Genesis 11, carrying on in his foolish pride – that same sin of pride that was behind the fall in the garden of Eden - in his arrogance, man decides to build this monstrous tower of Babel; because, of-course, there is nothing that man can’t do if he puts his mind to it, right? I mean, given enough effort, man could even save himself, right? I mean, there’s no need for God, right?

And so, with this determined conviction of arrogance, man starts on a construction project with the aim of building a tower all the way to heaven; man decides, in effect, that he’s going to make himself a god. And so, The Lord God has to intervene and save man from himself. It’s actually an act of mercy when God divides and confuses this monstrous plan. Because if man is permitted to go on with what he’s conceived, you can surely see a cataclysmic finish to this project. So God needs to save mankind from himself, and he does so with words – the power of the word. God multiplies and confuses the languages of man while he is at work on Babel. He divides mankind through words, so that man doesn’t end up producing a monstrosity that will surely end in catastrophe. The word is a powerful thing, you see, but it can also produce confusion.

That confusion was brought home last year in a series of wonderfully funny quotes that a member of the parish where I was working sent to me – quotes taken from a selection of church bulletins. Here are a few of them:

“The sermon this morning is entitled: Jesus Walks on the Water. Tonight’s sermon will be entitled: Searching for Jesus.”

“Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands! The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.”

“At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What Is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice.”

“Eight new choir robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.”

“The Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Tuesday at 7pm. Please use the back door. Instead, Weight Watchers will meet here at the Church on Thursday at 7pm. Please use the large double-door at the side entrance.”

“Don't let worry kill you off - let the Church help!”

Yes, misused, the word can produce confusion, and even great hurt. James of Jerusalem was right, you know, when he writes about the tongue in his Epistle:

“The [human] tongue corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of a man’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell... No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing...” (see Jas.3:8-10). *“The tongue is a fire, a world of evil”...* (see Jas.3:6).

Yet, when we come to this morning’s reading from Acts, on the day of Pentecost, another kind of tongues of fire were at work. And the words that were spoken by the Apostles that day of Pentecost produced not confusion, or hurt, but rather harmony, and understanding, and finally, through the Sacrament of Baptism, union with God. For we are told that 3,000 believed the message that was spoken that first day of Pentecost, and they were baptized, and added to the family of the believers (see Acts 2:41).

Of course, it’s nothing less than what Jesus has already promised. In the reading from John 14 for this morning, we heard Our Lord talk about this promised gift of the Holy Spirit, this Counselor, this Spirit of Truth that will be with us forever. (See Jn. 14:16-17) And there’s another promise that Jesus makes in this passage, a promise he repeats for emphasis. He says, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” (Jn.14:12-14) That is the kind of power the Word of God conveys to all those who are in Christ, the power of none other than He who made the universe.

The Day of Pentecost is one of the four days of the Church year set aside especially for Baptism. In this Sacrament, souls are added as full members to the family of God in Our Lord Jesus Christ. And this union is accomplished by speaking the word of the Lord in the assembly of the faithful. God created this world by speaking it into existence. And parents, and God-parents, and brand new brothers-and –sisters-in-the Lord with their vows speak into existence their new identity as Children of the Living God through their vows made in the power of God’s Word of God. What an awesome thing to witness!

So, on this Pentecost Sunday, that Sunday when the word of God came to rest with great power upon the church, I need to ask you something. Are you carrying the word of God into the world? Are you speaking comfort in tones of humility to those who are in pain? Do you have the courage to speak the truth in love to those who are lost, and do you have the perseverance to keep on speaking God’s truth to those who are seeking, even when it seems at times that people would rather not listen? And finally, do your words convey that sweet aroma of what St. Paul called our ministry of reconciliation? Do your words bring people into greater union with one another, and closer to our God?

The word of God: Spoken by the faithful, in humility, in truth, and in union with The Lord. Yes indeed. What power there is to be had, in the word of God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
Amen. jwb† 04-04-16

