

Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 2024 *Love Language* St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey, Rector

Some words can really let the wind out of my sail. Like ten years ago, one evening I was driving home from meeting with a parishioner who responded to my comment, “That was a powerful evening I won’t forget.” By asking the question, “Did you understand what they were saying?” It was an honest and vulnerable question, that also made me feel deflated because the person who had been in the same place I had been where for the past hour and a half we listened to Rwandan immigrants recount their experiences of the 1994 Rwandan genocide that was so chaotic no one knows for certain how many hundreds of thousands of people died in just three months, and she had not heard a word. The immigrants had not only made history more real by sharing their personal experiences, they shared how they felt God’s presence, and how this makes them appreciate different things about life. It was horrible and incredible to listen to them, and for me the room was filled with the Holy Spirit, during that time we were all held in the same holy breath of God, in love, care, sorrow, and respect. Despite not sharing their experience, I still felt connected to them, and that connection was holy.

Perhaps wanting to hold onto that feeling a little longer, I was disappointed to hear someone who had been in that sacred space with me confess she didn’t understand what they were saying because of their accents. She missed it. She may have sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit, but because she did not know how to listen, she could not receive the gift offered that evening and could not experience our connection.

It happens. Sometimes we can be in the midst of the holy and miss it because what someone interprets as the breath of God bringing renewal, energy, love, hope, courage, and creativity feels to someone else like a whirlwind that just makes a mess by blowing everything around.

In our first reading this morning from the Book of Acts of the Apostles we heard how the Holy Spirit gifted the followers of Jesus who were gathered in a room with the sudden ability to speak different languages was interpreted as noise by some passersby. In many parishes, today’s feast of Pentecost is often celebrated by inviting parishioners who can speak languages other than the common language, in our case English, to read the scripture readings for today in different languages. But whether they read all at the same time, or individually, unless everyone else speaks those different languages, no one can hear or understand what is being said, and might experience the reading much like the folks who accused the disciples of talking nonsense instead of being able to hear them recount God’s wonders. While it can be a fun thing to do, and I am not saying it was a wrong or bad practice, I wonder if it inadvertently highlights the occasions when we miss the Holy Spirit with us instead of helping us learn to recognize when the Holy Spirit shows up in our lives, in our neighborhoods, in our parish.

I wonder if we misinterpret the gift of the Holy Spirit that day in the upper room as the ability to speak languages instead of the gift of communication that met people where they were in their differences and helped them feel connected to God through Jesus. The reason for speaking different languages wasn’t for the disciples to show off or advertise the Holy Spirit as some shortcut to education. The Holy Spirit is not the equivalent of Rosetta Stone or Babble. The purpose was to communicate with different people; and there is much more to communication than words. To communicate, we need to listen as much as we speak, receive what the other says even if we don’t like it, and learn to maneuver around barriers – barriers are not the same thing as boundaries – to find common ground. It’s about finding a common language in the broader sense, because language is more than words.

For example, in the last few years, the term “love language” has found its way into society’s vocabulary. It originated from a book called *The Five Love Languages* written by marriage therapist Gary Chapman who observed one reason for strife between married couples is each individual has a different preferred way of expressing and receiving love. Simply put, for some love is expressed with caring acts,

for others it is verbalizing gratitude and appreciation, for others it is holding hands, or manifesting how they thought of the other by giving little tokens of affection. The idea is when you know your partner's preferred love language, and they know yours, then you can communicate better by expressing love in ways that make your partner feel good. Over time, the love language concept has grown to include other ways people show love through activities they love or enjoy doing. One example is cooking; some people claim cooking is their love language because they enjoy reading recipes, learning about food, cooking, and sharing what they made with others, especially those who enjoy eating it with them. Like our Winter Survivors Dinner last night; it is obvious that those of you who made food did so as an act of love and enjoyed sharing it, just as many of us enjoyed eating it. Music might be someone's love language, or prayer, or visual arts, or poetry, or science fiction; some people's love language is gardening, woodworking, or building care, anything that inspires, renews, connects to God can be a form of communication, can be a love language.

One of the important elements of communication we can forget is that to receive it, to understand it, we need to navigate challenges that might get in the way. For example, I love to share a meal someone made, especially if it is an act of love, however I have the dietary challenge of not being able to digest beef or pork. When someone asks about those challenges and adapts to them, then we can both share the love behind cooking and grow closer and share God's wonders in our lives because we both felt heard and respected.

To some, there is a lot of noise out in the world, and it can be overwhelming trying to discern where God is in all that noise. Perhaps a place to begin is curiosity, learning what other people's preferred language is. I've noticed some people's language is grief, other people's language is anxiety, or loneliness, or anger. If we try to force our preferred communication or language, we won't be able to hear each other, but if we can understand the lens through which they view the world, we might be able to translate their words and actions, their language, so we can understand each other and communicate in a holy, respectful way where instead of trying to be right by proving someone else wrong, we can share the wonders of God in our lives.

The parishioner who did not understand the Rwandan's accents at that meeting we attended realized she had missed something important and did not want to miss out anymore. So, perhaps inspired by the Holy Spirit, she asked me how I was able to understand the accent. She was curious and willing to do the work to transcend the barrier in her way. After I shared a few practical and personal tips, she gradually learned to listen and hear and in so doing learned a new language born out of the divine love of God, God's love language of inspiration, healing, and forgiveness.

One of the reasons I invited us to all wear red today is because no two people will probably have the same shade of red. Community is made of individual differences, and each of us brings our own language formed from our own interests, suffering, grief, joys, and gifts. The church is not a place for us all to be the same, but for us to recognize how the Holy Spirit interacts with all of us, creates connections that uses those differences to help make us whole, and through that Holy Communion of Christ's nourishment, inspires us to go out into the world communicating God's wonderful love, by learning how to listen, to relate, to navigate barriers so that we can feel the wind in our sails, the wind of the Holy Spirit that brings healing, forgiveness, renewal and love through the many love languages of the world that all share God's breath.