

Pentecost - June 9, 2019
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON
Christian Speech, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister
Based on Acts 2:1-11

The Bible is a talking book. It begins in speech. Not just any speech. Efficacious speech. Successful speech. Words that make things happen. *Let there be light*, God shouts into the void. And the lights come on. These aren't just any words. These are words with wings. Words with legs. This efficacious speech. Words that make things happen.

Christian, do your words make things happen?

The Bible is a talking book. The Israelites brought their suffering to speech. In bondage to the Egyptians, oppressed and tormented, they cried aloud to God. And God heard their suffering. God, speaking to Moses, told Moses to have himself a chat, a talk with Pharaoh. Moses strode over to the palace, stomped up the steps, banged on the great doors, and right there to Pharaoh, Moses spoke the most confounding, confronting, demanding, and morally charged words: *Let my people go*. No one had ever said those words to Pharaoh before. Those four words hung there, in the throne room, as an indictment. Once said, they couldn't be unsaid. Once said, the system of oppressor and oppressed was exposed as rotten, godless. Those four words once spoken – *Let my people go* – mark the beginning of the end of Pharaoh's cruelty.

The Bible is a talking book. It is a book of words; words that make things happen. Christian, do your words make things happen?

After *Let there be light* and *Let my people go*, it is Jesus who is God's next best word. Jesus is what God has been trying to say from the beginning. Jesus is the logos – the Word on the tongue of God – the Word that, once spoken, becomes flesh and lives among us.

Jesus was himself a talker. He talked to fishermen, to women, to Gentiles, to Samaritans, to Pharisees, to lepers, to the lame, to the blind. He talked to sinners. He talked to peasants and to a king. He talked to Satan. He even talked to the dead.

He healed with words: *Take up your pallet and walk*. He freed with words: *Your sins are forgiven you*. He saved with words: *You, who are without sin, cast the first stone*. He conquered death with words: *Lazarus, come out!* He taught with words: *A Sower went out to sew*.

Jesus was a talker. He talked to the tempter in the desert. He talked to crowds on a hillside. He talked to a storm from a boat. (He talked the storm down!) He talked to Moses and Elijah on a high mountain. (Don't you want to know what they said?) Jesus talked to God from the cross. Then from the other side of the grave he talked to Mary, Peter and Thomas. From beyond death, he talked them back into life. Jesus, the word that became flesh, came talking.

The Bible is a talking book. It is a book of words. Not just any words. Not empty words. Words that make things happen.

Christian, do your words make things happen?

The Tower of Babel is the story of the failure of speech, of confusion and cacophony, of chivaree and pandemonium. The Witch Trials were babble. Nazi propaganda was babble. "Separate but equal" is babble. "Don't ask, don't tell" is babble. "Collateral damage" is babble.

Babble is everywhere. Everywhere. The so-called newscasters yelling over one another: babblers. Babble is the shock jock, and the angry, blithering blogs. Babble is ideology and propaganda, cant, and misspeak. It is the sound of human hubris, of dissonance and danger.

Babble is the sound of the serpent who seduces Adam and Eve with slippery, slimy words. The serpent is the one who promises that this piece of fruit, this pill, this cosmetic, that Lotto ticket, this *whatever* will make you wiser, younger, slimmer, richer, stronger, or make you live forever. Promise! Swear to God. Cross my heart.

The story of Pentecost is the answer to the Tower of Babel and to human babble. The triumph of Pentecost is the intelligibility of speech, of words that work, efficacious speech, words that communicate, words that build and bridge.

The story of Pentecost tells us that all the followers of Jesus were in Jerusalem and that, in an instant, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak. At their speaking, crowds gathered. Jerusalem was a worldly, cosmopolitan city. The crowd was comprised of people from every nation under heaven. Imagine a crowd comprised of people from Afghanistan and South Korea, from the Soviet Union and the United States, from Haiti and Uganda, the English and the Wampanoag, the Peruvian and the Pakistani.

Here's what captured their attention. Here's what was happening: each one – the Kenyan and the Syrian, the Mexican and North Korean – heard the followers of Jesus speaking in the native language of each. They were amazed and astonished, captivated, by this feat understanding.

The One who spoke the world into being at the beginning of time, the One who's best Word became flesh and lived among us, this same One gives birth to the church in act of speech. But not just any speech: efficacious speech, successful speech, speech that bridges and builds, speech that communicates. Speech with wings and legs. Speech that heals and saves.

And you, Christian, do your words have wings and legs; do your words heal and save?

Justice Samuel Sewall, an early member of this congregation, apologized for having condemned some of the so-called witches to death. He was the only of the justices to do so. His speech of repentance and confession was Pentecostal speech, churchly speech, Godly speech. It turned the tide.

Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is Pentecostal speech, Godly talk. It demands of those who participate humility, honesty, exposure, truth.

This past Thursday, New York City's Police Commissioner apologized on behalf of the New York Police Department for its officers' actions during the Stonewall uprising in 1969, fifty years ago. Here is what he said. "What happened should not have happened. The actions taken by the N.Y.P.D. were wrong, plain and simple. The actions and the laws were discriminatory and oppressive, and for that, I apologize." Better late than never. His statement is good speech, real words, efficacious, meaningful. His words have wings and legs

Christian, do your words do such things? Do they name the truth and, when necessary, apologize?

We live in a babbling world. We live in a world filled with babbling, misspeak, cant, and propaganda. We live in a cacophonous world populated with smooth-tongued (and not so smooth-tongued) tempters.

Commented [NST1]:

We come to church, we gather in sanctuaries such as this, to listen hard to our sacred texts, to turn off the shock jocks, the ranters, the loud talking heads – to learn the difference between Babel and Pentecost, between trickery and truth, between hubris and humility, between the ways of the world and the ways of God.

We come to church, we gather in the presence of God, to declare our defiance of babble and our commitment to churchly speech, Godly speech, speech that edifies, builds, bridges, heals and saves. We come to this place, week after week after week, to claim our place as those called and trained to efficacious speech, humble speech, speech that asks questions and probes for insight, speech that points beyond ourselves, beyond human knowing, to God; speech that does some good; speech that raises the dead and dreams of what might yet be. We come together to learn and practice such speech in here, that we might speak it out there, that *what* we say and *how* we say it might heal, rescue, defend, forgive, soothe, and befriend.

And you, Christian, do your words do such things. Do your words heal, rescue, defend, forgive, soothe, and befriend?

PRAYER

God help us to speak well. God make us to speak good words: words to bridge the divides, words to heal and save and rescue. Words with wings and legs. Words to mend a broken and breaking world. Words to mend broken and breaking hearts. Words worthy of the Christ in whose name we gather. Words, dear God, to make your heart glad. We ask these prayers in the name of your Word made flesh, even Jesus Christ. Amen.