



## LESSONS for LIFE

**MAY 31, 2009 7:00 p.m**  
**IT'S ALL IN (ABOUT) THE WORDS!!**  
**Deacon Randi Williams**

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This seems as if it is becoming an annual affair – you and I meeting here and chatting about Pentecost. Years ago as an Anglican turned Pentecostal, I would have believed that Pentecostals held the monopoly on the experience of Pentecost. I'm glad that that is not true. Those Baptists, evangelicals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Quakers and even some United Church people can and do experience the spirit of Pentecost. Some of you may recall that last year the celebration of Pentecost fell on exactly the same Sunday as Mother's Day – what a challenge that was to deliver a chat to you. Yet we discovered that there are several similarities between mothers and the Holy Spirit; and on the other hand there are gladly many differences. How many of you recall the film *Mommy Dearest*? I'm so glad that God is not like Joan Crawford! Tonight, however, Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, the Spirit, whatever you want to call the Presence has our complete concentration.

*Let's pray.... Loving God we thank you for who you are. We come expecting, we come questioning, we come looking, we come a blank slate expecting to hear from you. And so may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight as we leave this place empowered anew. Amen.*

Tonight I would like to chat with you about words. It's all about words which of course evolve into what we call language. Periodically we hear someone ask, "Why did she or why did he say that?" The question is normally asked after something negative has been said. Oh, our words. They can hurt, they can soothe. They can condemn, they can reassure or our words can wound like no dagger can. They can heal and they can start wars or they can make peace a reality. If you are a parent or someone who has had authority over younger people you may have heard yourself say in a stern voice, "WHAT did I hear you say?" when there were undertones of grumbling about some thing the parent or the older person did not appreciate.

Our words can be positive or negative. Our positive words can make us soar like an eagle, which we sang about tonight. In contrast our words can bring us crashing down in defeat, sometimes before we have even bothered to leave the ground! It is said that our words as innocent as they are can make us or break us. We've heard someone say or we have said, "Sticks and stones may break our bones but words will never hurt me." It's a wonderful concept, but how many of us actually believe it? Some words cut us to the core and sometimes leave life-long scars and emotional damage. We know some of those words from our youth and even now, such words make us uncomfortable, cause us to squirm, cause us to get angry. We are constantly reminded of the nagging fact that once words have left our mouths, it is too late to call them back; they will find a spot to lodge and often they do so in someone's heart or in someone's mind.

Here is an example of how powerful words are and the importance of knowing them in their cultural context. Has anyone here read the book *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) by Barbara Kingsolver? I see one or two hands raised. It's about an American evangelical evangelist who in 1959 takes his family as missionaries – whether they wanted to go or not - to a fictional village in the Belgian Congo. He's determined to save those heathens. A few days after being there he feels he knows the language, he



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knows what those people were thinking and he proclaimed to the villagers, “Jesus is bangala.” What he meant to say – what he hoped would be interpreted – was “Jesus is supreme” but by using the word “bangala” he said, “Jesus is poisonwood”, the name of an awful horribly irritating plant that the villagers hated and wanted to get rid of. How disturbing when we want to connect with someone but don’t speak the language, or we can’t get the words out the right way or we can’t get them out at all. We often say we’re lost for words.

We cannot for one minute assume that words are to be used lightly. You see, words evolve due to circumstances and humanity. The English language through its stages is an example: First we had Indo European, then Old English (500 – 1100 A.D.); then we had Middle English (1100 – 1500), then early Modern English (between 1500 and 1800) when our King James version of the Bible was produced in 1611. Then we had late Modern English with all of its variations (1800 to the present).

All our words continued to evolve as they were introduced: 1911 – phone number; 1922 – class divisions; 1936 – male chauvinism; 1947 bikini; 1959 – hair spray; 1968 – reggae; 1973 the F word; 1984 – shopaholic; 1004 metrosexual; 2000 – bling. None of these words were used exclusively before these dates. Yet before they became part of the established English language they were hanging around as “trendy” or “weird” until recognized as contributors to the language. I wonder what new words were introduced in 30 AD during the time of Jesus? I wonder what words he was instrumental in introducing to the vocabulary and life of Judaism?

Just last Thursday I read in the Globe & Mail I read that somewhere in our world there is a new word introduced every 98 minutes; how they arrived at that I don’t know, but some overly enthusiastic guy who monitors language over-enthusiastically declared that “the English language is due to give birth to its one millionth word on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at precisely 5:22 a.m. EST. Don’t ask!!!! He gave a sampling with their meanings and whether they will still be in use when some of us may still be around:  
**FUNDOO** – not with the pot or the cheese. The word FUNDOO comes from India and means “cool.” Now I thought “cool” was on its way out but cool is still going to be around in 2050 and it has a high ranking.

**MISUNDERESTIMATE** – used mistakenly by – no surprise – past President George W. Bush who was just here in our city, but they’re saying that that word in the year 2050 is going to be in high usage.

**SLUMDOG** – children of the slum, used in the film Slumdog Millionaire. It’s still going to be around in 2050.

**BANGSTER** – means legitimate bankers as gangsters and thieves. In the year 2050 it’s going to have a low priority.

And I couldn’t resist: **OBAMA** – meaning as a root word Obamania, Obamamentum, Obamanomics. That will have a high priority.

Our words fly around us as we Blog, e-mail, Twitter, wiki, instant message, texting, YouTube and all the others I am totally unaware of. I can’t keep up. I have difficulty accepting the fact that people write/type the letter “u” for the word “you.”



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Our scripture tonight is well known. ACTS 2: 1 – 11. Now tonight I know that I could have used any number of titles about the wind and how appropriate that would be considering last night and the wind we've had today, or fire, spirit, tongues – which may be a new concept to some of you; but the theme of words spoke to my heart and I trust that it speaks to yours. Do you know that there are people whose jobs are 'word smiths'? I used to call it reviewing, revising and improving, but then someone decided to name herself a "word-smither" and she now gets lots of money after giving it a new name - and a new career.

And now our text: ACTS 2: 1 – 11

<sup>1</sup> *When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord<sup>[a]</sup> in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

<sup>5</sup> *And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."*

According to one professor at Drew Theological Seminary, "This simple gathering in Jerusalem fifty days after the crucifixion of Jesus is a defining moment for Christianity." Pentecost is the birthday of the church as we know it. Until that moment the faith simply known as "the Way" was an assemblage led by eleven 'ragtag', unreliable men from Galilee. Their transformation and the transformation of their known world is initiated by this event. Pentecost in this context is a monumental, paradigm-changing event.

Jesus had left his disciples twice: First by crucifixion and then by ascension. Brent spoke about this a few weeks ago when he used the text title *..Why Stand You gazing?* On both occasions Jesus had told them he was leaving, but the second time he added, "I want you to wait here until you receive the Holy Spirit." They may not have even heard of those words before, "Holy Spirit". The group of men and women followed his instructions. They went back to the city and gathered in a room, where for ten days they waited, prayed, waited, they ate, they talked, they waited, they prayed, they waited...for what? I don't think it takes very much imagination to understand what must have been going on in their minds during those hours: everything that Jesus had taught them, the miracles and the conflicts with religious leaders. As great as those may have been they were probably asking, "What now? What are we sitting here waiting for? Where is this going to leave me? I've already risked lots. Will this faith really work?"

Here's the bold assertion: the Christian Church would not and cannot exist without the presence of the Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, Comforter, paraquet. How significant is it? Well, let's start with the obvious for us. Within the past decade we have seen a distinct change in the face of not just Toronto but Canada and North America. *TIME* magazine wrote an article called the *Browning of America*. But it's more than the obvious colour difference: languages, uncommon or new words are also attached to this. Toronto likes to laud itself as being the most multicultural city in the world. I'm not sure what measuring stick is used and applied but that's the declaration. Some institutions do try to play their employment role



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regarding diversity but, as the media periodically reminds us, it's not easy for people when they're not in the dominant group. Often we have to really prove ourselves and in some cases be twice as good as the competition and in some cases that is still not a guarantee of a job. But, I digress – I'm back to the point. How does this connect with words and Pentecost?

Well, Pentecost was a banner day for multiculturalism in Jerusalem. It was as one minister proclaimed, "The Tower of Babel in Genesis – turned upside down." And both incidents are about words. Here are four comparisons:

If you know anything about the tower of Babel man tried to ascribe to be God; the result was a confusion of tongues. At Pentecost the tongues were and was understood. At Babel God scattered the people in confusion across the world. At Pentecost people scattered to spread revolutionary news of a loving, caring, compassionate God.

At Babel words/language was used to promote human achievement of making a name for themselves. At Pentecost words/language was used to proclaim God's great works with humanity. Babel resulted in disunity. Pentecost resulted in unity of force.

What was felt at Pentecost was a glorious manifestation of the grace of God. Mind you, the event would also prove to be a tough day for lecturers as they pronounced all those forbidding nationalities: Parthians, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, Phrygians and Pamphylians. Picture it! Devout Jews of the Diaspora (meaning all over) were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the fiftieth day after the consecration of the harvest and Passover. Although they were united by a similar religious heritage, their languages and therefore dialects were as diverse or more so than those heard on a street car or the subway or at Pearson Airport today.

The eventual event for the disciples was that something spectacular occurred. **God happened.** I'll say that again, because I think some of us forget that. When we come into this place God happens and I think we need to remind ourselves. I know it is said that we meet God here but we BRING God with us. God happens. The symbols – or for some literalism is important and relevant and they tell the story: WIND, FIRE, 'TONGUES' AND SPIRIT!!! WOW!. Suddenly the "Upper Room" was alive and ablaze as the disciples looked like oversized candles crowned with tongues of fire. The text doesn't say what was said but we are told that EVERYONE in the area heard their specific language and therefore they understood. No one was left out of the dialogue... and that's what God's love is all about. There is no one left. Oh, if we could just get that simple concept out to the world what a difference it would make. There would be no exclusion regardless of religion, denomination, ethnicity or colour. No one, no one would be able to declare that you are not wanted, as Timothy Findley wrote in his book, "Not Wanted on the Voyage."

In addition to all of the excitement and shock at hearing their languages, I believe that there was an abundance of joy. I doubt that the event was a quiet occurrence. The text says that they were heard all over. I believe that because of the powerful joy they experienced that they danced, they laughed, they were energized, they had a "Holy Spirit" party. As they sensed and experienced a new awakening they were accused of being drunk; giddy beyond belief. Anyone ever been to a Pentecostal service? I have a confession. I was there this morning – at my old church. I went because I wanted to know what they were doing on Pentecost Sunday. I should have guessed! It's no different from any other Sunday. I walked in the door and the half an hour of music just lifted me and I could have left after that. You



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know, we look at those people on television and if we leave our skepticism at the door we wonder. Joy; they have it, you can have it also. It's infectious and whatever they feel about us or we feel about them, we serve the same God. The power of words to elevate, to encourage, to bring together differences and cause people to be joyful. This was confirmation to the group that they were part of God's family and that God is love, not just in poetic theory but in practical fact. They learned through their words, through their languages. They learned that in belonging to God they also belonged to each other.

What about us? What about our words? What do people – our co-workers, our friends, our neighbours, our community hear when we speak. Someone said, "Don't just speak, say something." And finally, what about if we don't say something? That could be more damaging. Often silence can be more harmful than words. Silence speaks volumes. It condones: bashing, abuse, bigotry, hatred, harsh comments, bullying, harmful indoctrination – they would all continue. If you've ever received an e-mail from me you may have noticed the tag line by Martin Luther King which reads: *Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.* And you've heard this before:

*In Germany the Nazis came for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.  
Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for the trade unionists but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade-unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics but I was a Protestant so I didn't speak up.  
And then they came for me and by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone.*

Pentecost is not simply a day to remember the birth of the church. It's more so a way to recall our commitment to open ourselves to change the world or be changed by the world with the help of the Holy Spirit. I believe that Pentecost is not just a name, but an experience that happens in churches weekly in this place. I believe that Pentecost can be experienced on a daily basis. Daily we are empowered to love ourselves, love each other, love God and our world. God's presence with us – God's presence in us and God's presence around us. We have that joy; we have that spirit; we have Pentecost.

Amen.