

Feast of Pentecost

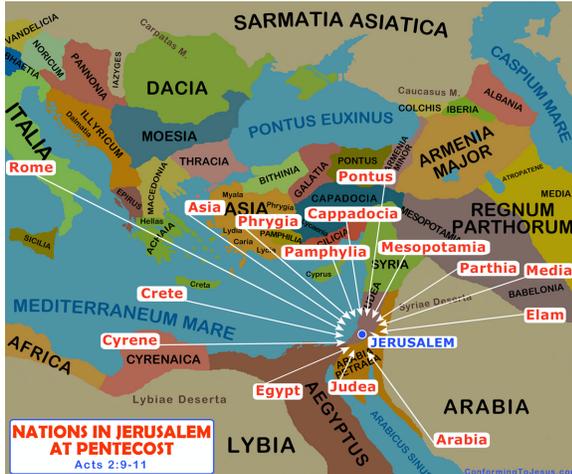
Cycle B, 5.23.21

Acts 2:1-11/1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13/

John 26-27, 16:12-15

'LISTENING' TO THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT

They were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language.



There's a difference between "hearing" and "listening." To hear something is to let sound pass through the eardrum to the brain and to be aware that some sort of noise has just taken place. I "hear" the door slam, the faint sound of the BART train leaving the Lafayette station, the bark of a neighbor's dog. Hearing is simply the act of perceiving sound by the ear. If you're not hearing-impaired, hearing simply happens. Listening, however, is something you consciously choose to do. Listening requires concentration so that your brain processes meaning from words and sentences. To listen means to bring awareness to the world around me, to stop and slow down my own thought process enough so that something or someone else can enter in. Hearing is automatic; listening requires an inner attitude as well the mechanics of an ear.

They met at a party. Maria was a third-generation college senior from a Massachusetts Italian/Irish family and he

was a doctoral student from Iran. Despite their differences in just about everything, they fell in love and married. That was 25 years and four children ago. Their relationship has had its difficult moments, to be sure. Bridging two such different cultures and histories and religions and languages has not been without its challenges. As Maria wrote in an essay, their life together required extraordinary sensitivity and listening. She wrote "*We muddled through some memorable 'that's not what I meant' episodes that were made worse by our different cultural perspectives. Masoud's English was near perfect, but he was prone to word mix-ups that caused unnecessary arguments. Once I was insulted because he called me 'durable' when, in fact, he was trying to tell me I was 'adorable.' Then, too, language is more than words. He was raised in a Muslim culture where men and women avoid direct eye contact, but I found it disconcerting that he would not look at me when talking.*



Time and again, they resorted to rounds of bickering: '*You Americans have no culture*' he would say; '*Why are you so Iranian?*' she would say. That left hurt feelings and stirred mutual doubt about their marital compatibility. But a marriage is more than stereotypes. Commitment to their relationship has meant a willingness to clarify their statements to each other and learn to decipher the hidden meanings

behind what the other says. *"With time, Maria wrote, I have learned that his language – Farsi - is characterized by elaborate linguistic courtesy that generally avoids confrontation. Masoud's habit of answering 'thank you' to every request instead of a definitive 'yes' or 'no' is his way of being polite. And gradually he has realized that my cheerful 'American' optimism doesn't mean that I am always happy."* Maria and Masoud know all too well the reality that "marriage is unpredictable and complicated, a never-ending and sometimes painstaking process of give-and-take that still allows for their cultural differences.



The real miracle of Pentecost is one of listening: The Spirit of God overcomes the barriers of language and perception, opening not only the crowds' minds but their hearts to hear the word of God spoken by Peter and the Eleven. The Spirit enables us to listen to the voice of God in the context of God's compassion and peace, enabling us to hear what God actually speaks and not what we want or hope to hear. As on Pentecost, God's Spirit enables a wife and husband to love enough to listen with their hearts, to discern one another's real meaning that is much deeper than the imperfect, imprecise words they "say" to each other.

God's Spirit gives a parent the grace to be patient enough with a child to hear beyond the tears or the yelling to a deeper

need for understanding or affection. The Holy Spirit helps a student to overcome the "it's boring" response and really listen to the significance of a lesson being taught in history or English or math, even with only a couple weeks of school left. God's Spirit enables a pastor to listen to the real issue underneath a person's frustration or anger and to bring compassion and understanding to the conversation. The gift of Pentecost faith enables us to hear the voice of God speaking in the midst of the clamor and busyness, the pain and despair, of our lives, inviting us to embrace the life and love of God in our homes and hearts.

Whatever happens in our life, whatever roads we may travel, that Holy Spirit is present as conscience, as repentance, as a way back, as an inner moral compass, as an urge to pray, as the desire to forgive, as a concern for someone who has experienced tragedy, as outrage against injustice, as direction for the future. The Holy Spirit is present not just in tongues of fire or in extraordinary charismatic gifts. We underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit if we limit the Spirit's presence to extraordinary gifts and encounters. That Spirit is present in the most ordinary of daily efforts on our part. When we try to understand others, when we try to unite rather than divide, when we show courage in not only proclaiming the gospel, but in living it out, when we open our hearts in prayer, when we make wise choices, when we are faithful to our vows and promises, when we appreciate the majesty of God's presence in creation. These are the powerful everyday gifts of the Holy Spirit, so often overlooked because we're looking for something unusual.

In today's gospel, as Jesus reassures his followers about the promise of the Holy Spirit, he says: *"I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth."* One of the ways that the Spirit will guide us to all truth is through our capacity to listen. That listening begins with God in prayer and continues as we listen to the voice of the Spirit present in all God's people and in one another. There are quite practical ways to hear that Spirit's voice. It comes from God, so try to slow down long enough, to sit in a quiet, undistracted place once in a while where, with an open mind and heart, you can have a conversation with God. Use the two-ears/one mouth rule: Since God gave us two ears but only one mouth, we should listen twice as much as we speak. If you do this often enough and sincerely, you will hear the voice of God speaking to you and guiding you to the truth you need for your life.



Seek out the voice of the Holy Spirit from one another, not in contentious argument and partisanship, but in an honest attempt to mutually listen to the *Spirit of truth, who will guide you to all truth*, as Jesus promised. Winston Churchill once said: *"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."* May the Holy

Spirit, our Advocate and Helper, give each of us the courage to listen to the living voice of God in the many people and places where it arises and then carry out the action of the Spirit in ways that can transform our hearts and our world.



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