

## **“SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF FAITH”**

Acts 2:1-11

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I was confirmed in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. It was a grueling two year process. Classes met for two hours once a week from September through May. We studied the Old Testament, the New Testament, and learned about Lutheran church history. We memorized Bible verses. We learned the correct understanding of Baptism and Communion and especially about the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. At the end of it all we went through an examination process before the whole congregation. Well, they were all invited even if it was only the parents. But the pastor would ask us questions, invite us to share the verse we had memorized, and we'd do sword drills, compete to be the one who located first a particular scripture passage. It was like walking two miles to school... uphill... both ways.

I actually quite enjoyed it. I found the Bible fascinating and learning to think theologically quite engaging. It all came in handy when I went to seminary many years later. I suspect that I was unusual among my peers, but I was really glad to be given a language with which I could speak about my faith; a faith that would continue to grow over the years, and a language that would deepen both in its complexity and simplicity.

Seminary brought a whole new vocabulary. We would talk about Christology, theories of the atonement, the doctrine of the Trinity and the many fancy names for its various heresies. We would explore biblical hermeneutics, learning historical, redaction, and form criticism. And there were the various theological perspectives: orthodox, reformed, liberation, process, and feminist theology.

One of the things I've enjoyed in ministry is the opportunity to bring some of this language into the confirmation class as I worked with them on writing their own personal faith statements. A few of the young people I've worked with have found this helpful, but mostly their eyes just glaze over.... I actually love this reminder that I am probably overeducated when it comes to speaking the language of faith.

This year, for the first time, we tossed aside the Trinitarian format of the faith statement and I found it enormously freeing. For several decades a certain segment of the church has been shifting its focus from insisting on the correct expression of belief to the practice of faith that reflects our experience of God. We're less likely to emphasize learning about God than we are to seek out ways to experience God.

For example, when I joined the Presbyterian Church back in 1983, we were still having conversations about whether children should be included in the sacrament of communion. There was a feeling by many that children should have a minimum level of what communion meant. They should at least understand that in this sacrament we remember the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross to atone for our sins. If you were Lutheran, you understood that the bread did not represent the body of Christ, but that it was the body of

Christ, that Christ's presence was "in, with, and under the bread." And if you were paying attention in confirmation class, you knew that the term for this was Consubstantiation. If you were Presbyterian, you probably would say that the bread represented the Body of Christ, but this is not quite an accurate understanding of our doctrine of the real presence in the sacrament of communion.

When the terms of the conversation changed from a proper knowledge of communion to how were children experiencing their exclusion from the sacrament, we began to see things differently. When children take communion, they experience the acceptance and love of the faith community. They understand on some level that they are loved by God.

This morning, we will recite together the Apostle's Creed, a statement of the early church's faith. People have told me many times that they're very uncomfortable saying it, especially when they get to the line, "born of the Virgin Mary." Now I think this is a very important statement of faith from the early church, but it was inevitable that members of the later faith community would struggle with the language, because the language is tied to the experience and the challenges of the early church, not to our experiences today.

Compare this to the Lord's Prayer which we say every week. Other than some who for good reasons would prefer to address God as something other than Father, no one has ever complained to me about this prayer. Of course some people do mention that it's become too rote, that no one really listens to what they're saying; but if we do think about it, this prayer speaks to us in our time too. We still look to God for daily bread. We still recognize that things happen on earth that don't reflect what God would want for us and so we ask for God's will to be done. The importance of forgiveness may never become irrelevant. The language of the Lord's prayer reflects and speaks to our experience.

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God filled the faith community in a marvelous way: the rush of a mighty wind, tongues of flame on the heads of the disciples, and a mass confusion of languages was spreading around the place. Except it wasn't confusing. Each person heard the faithful speaking in their own tongue. The words being said were understood. The church had yet to develop any systematic theology. On this day, the church was not concerned with abstractions, with the right understanding of doctrine, or with impressive and profound ways of capturing the faith. The church, under the guidance of the Spirit, was focused on telling a story, the story of the mighty acts of God. And they told it in a way that it could be understood, and in a way that reflected not their knowledge as much as their experience of God's presence among them.

Theological reflection is important. Learning to speak clearly about what we believe about God is critical as we mature in faith, and as we bear witness as a faith community to a hurting world. But learning to speak the language of faith begins with wonder at the things that God is doing. It begins with our experiences of God's presence. It's not about how we think God should be present or what we believe about how God interacts with the world.

It's about the awe we feel in a sunset, the unexplained peace we feel in the midst of a loss. It's about the unexpected joys, the unmerited forgiveness, and the unknown motivations to acts of kindness. We don't need to give our experiences of God a fancy name. We don't need to turn them into a profound pattern for how God relates to the whole world. The language of faith flows from the heart and through the movement of the Spirit within us. The language of faith arises from the love of God that is alive within and around us. You don't have to be seminary educated. You don't have to be an elder in the church. You don't have to be a life-long church-goer. You just need the eyes to see God at work in your world, ears attuned to the whispers of God in your heart, and a mind filled with the wonder of God present and alive among us. Amen.