

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, May 23, 2021
Pentecost Sunday

"Finding Your Authentic Voice"

Act of the Apostles 2:1-21



503 There Is a Balm in Gilead

Chorus
There is a balm in Gilead, it will heal your soul.

Cup Soloist
There is a balm in Gilead, it will heal your soul.

Chorus
There is a balm in Gilead, it will heal your soul.

Chorus
There is a balm in Gilead, it will heal your soul.

There is a great African-American spiritual entitled “There Is a Balm in Gilead”. It is one of my favorites. There is a verse in the song that says, “If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, ‘He died for all’”. Can *any* of us preach like Peter? Hmmmm. I wonder. Or, can *all* of us preach like Peter? Yes! But, I think it depends. It depends on whether we are able to find our authentic voices.



On Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian church, when the apostles remained in Jerusalem following the resurrection appearances, the Holy Spirit came upon them “sounding like a mighty wind and appearing like tongues of fire upon each of them” (Acts of the Apostles 2:2). Then all the apostles began to miraculously speak in foreign languages. Jews from all around the Ancient Near East who spoke different languages were amazed to hear their particular languages spoken by rural, country hick bumkin fisherman from Galilee.

We celebrate Pentecost when the Jews celebrate Shavuot, seven weeks after Passover. We celebrated Passover on April 4th (that is, on Easter). If we count seven weeks, we hit today, May 23.



Pentecost is actually the Greek name for the Jewish festival called the ‘Feast of Weeks’, the second of three major Jewish feasts, and it marked the end of the harvest.¹

Let’s get back to the Pentecost story. Everyone came together in Jerusalem for this feast. Given that so many people spoke many different languages, it was like the story of the Tower of Babel, when everyone spoke many languages so no one could understand one another. I suspect, that is where we derive the term ‘babble’ when a baby speaks gibberish or when a politician goes on and on speaking rubbish!



It is also the name of a language learning app. “Babbel is a premium, subscription-based language learning app [...] that offers fifteen different languages from seven

¹ Mark Olson, “Pentecost”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, ed in chief, David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 222-223.

‘display’ languages”.² In the first century cosmopolitan Jerusalem context, preaching the gospel was slow going for a bunch of working class fishermen from the backwater of Galilee. They did not know how to speak the languages of these sophisticated world travelling Graeco-Roman Jews.



Then it happened, the apostles acquired the ability to speak, as if God downloaded the Babble app into the ‘hardware’ that was the apostles. And they preached the gospel and people understood. This set the stage for Peter who delivered a *tour de force*! He delivered a sermon that ‘wowed’ everyone. The scriptures tell us that three-thousand people were converted that day and hence Pentecost is considered the birth of the Christian church.

Let us get back to the hypothetical in the spiritual, “If you cannot preach like Peter...”. Well, we all know that I cannot preach like Peter. If I could, I would have a quarter of Brattleboro’s 12,000 population becoming new members with Matt.

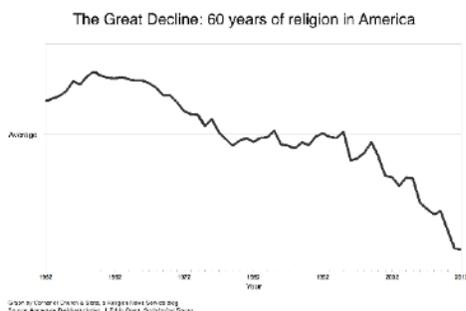
² “Babble”, *Wikipedia*, accessed May 22, 2021. Found at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babble#:~:text=Babble%20is%20a%20premium%2C%20subscription,Portuguese%2C%20Italian%20and%20Swedish\).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babble#:~:text=Babble%20is%20a%20premium%2C%20subscription,Portuguese%2C%20Italian%20and%20Swedish).)



New Members Are Joining

This morning, it is just Matt. But not really. In Spirit with Matt is Susan, and Daniel, and Martha, A.J., and Jackie. Also with them is Margit and Tony. And there are other Jesus followers like Stephanie, Gary, and Teddy and Gabby who cherish our faith community and find meaning here, yet subscribe to other Christian traditions. I know of Daniel, a Quaker, and Jim, a Jew, and Marie, a member of the Bahá'í faith who all feel part of the fellowship of Centre and gain from the teachings of Jesus while remaining perfectly and beautifully committed to their own faiths. I treasure all of these people, Congregationalist and Catholic, Christian and non-Christian, who somehow gravitate with us at Centre toward God.

So, I can't preach like Peter. Can you? Well, apparently not.



Yesterday in our webinar with Paul Nickerson, we learned that 85% of churches, including Centre Church, are in decline because less than 20% of the nation's

population worships in church. We learned that less than 10% of people in Vermont go to church. So, we aren't preaching like Paul. In fact, we learned that less than 2% of practicing Christian even invite another person to worship, let alone preaches. Yesterday we learned that a vast majority of newcomers to church only come because they were invited by someone they knew and with whom they were in relationship.

Our spiritual instructs us what to do "if we cannot preach like Peter". The spiritual directs us to nonetheless "tell the love of Jesus".



As simple as this seems, it is not easy for many of us. There are many reasons why we don't tell other of the love of Jesus. We often lack self-esteem. We think we are not worthy to teach, guide, and instruct others. Often, being conservative New England Yankees, we are shy and hesitant to invite people to worship for fear that they might think we are 'nutters'. Perhaps we fear that we lack faith ourselves. So, how can we encourage others to a life of faith? No matter the reason that keeps

you from “telling the love of Jesus”, I want to affirm you and encourage you this Pentecost. I want to affirm you and encourage you by speaking to you about Peter.



Previous to Pentecost, and during Jesus’ ministry, Peter got just about everything wrong. Peter frequently misunderstood Jesus. Jesus even once called Peter ‘Satan’, or at least said that Satan spoke through Peter (Mark 8:27-33). Peter could not stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42). Peter ran away and denied Jesus (Mark 14:54-72). Peter, in every respect, was incompetent. He was no priest. He was no prophet. He was no scholar. He was hardly educated. And Peter often was the quintessential disciple who just didn’t get it, or as one scholar wrote, he was “the embodiment of the disciples’ failures” (at least according to the account in the gospel of Mark).³ Yet, on Pentecost, Peter found his voice. And as we heard in our reading this morning, he spoke with confidence and with integrity.

³ Karl Donfried, “Peter”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, ed in chief, David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 255.



I am a firm believer that we all have an authentic voice. Some of us have experience with mental illness. We can attend support groups, establish relationships, and with our voice invite people to experience what we experience at Centre Church. Some of us are recovering alcoholics. We can join an AA group as a mentor, establish relationships, and with our voices invite people to hear more of the Bible at Centre Church.



Some of us are advocates of racial justice. Partner with the NAACP or the ROOT Social Justice Centre, establish relationships, and with your voice tell people that Centre Church is a 'Just Peace Church'. If your passion is the environment and science, attend a Vermont350 or Extinction Rebellion meeting, establish relationships, and with your voice share with people how your church is considering placing solar panels on its roof.



Some of you know a touch of Spanish, or some of you know not a word. Walk across Main Street to CASP, Community Asylum Seekers Project, and with your voice volunteer to assist a family. Just this past week Alix Fedoruk from St. Michael's Episcopal church brought to my office and introduced a lovely mother and two daughters recently arrived from Honduras. Margo already visited CASP and is keen for our church to establish a working relationship. Though Mission & Service, establish a relationship with CASP and with your voice share with them how Centre Church's relationship with a community in El Salvador for over twenty years inspires you. This morning, I want all of us to consider the establishment of relationships with organizations and constituencies in Brattleboro as an equivalent to learning and speaking 'a new language'. I don't suggest you adopt **all** of these 'new languages'. No one tries to learn fifteen new languages at once! Pick *one* new 'language' and speak the simple truth about what inspires you to risk and reach-out to it.



This morning I suggest to you that the apostles in Jerusalem learned a new language. With their voices, they communicated, established relationships, and they told people from all around the world about their experience with Jesus and invited them to join their little band of believers (that is just about the same size as our small band of believers at Centre Church!). Despite all their former failures, the apostles found their authentic voices and they used them to great effect.



Many of you may be wondering what is your authentic voice? Well, it is simply this: your authentic voice is your God-given voice that communicates, establishes a relationship, and, as the spiritual says, simply “tells of the love of

Jesus”, his love for us, and our therefore our love for one another and the world.

Happy Pentecost, friends.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the people of God responded, “Amen!”