

**New Life Episcopal Church
Uniontown, Ohio**



**A Sermon Pentecost Sunday
May 24, 2026**

The Rev Barbara Bond

Acts 2: 1-21, 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, John 20:19-23

The gift of language

Wow! What an exciting scene! Jesus has barely departed to heaven, and now, just as he promised, the Holy Spirit has descended on a huge group of people from various countries and ethnicities. All these people speak different languages, but the Holy Spirit arrives like a swooping wind and mixes them all up. Suddenly everyone hears everyone else, and they understand each other, no matter what language they are speaking. This is the real miracle of that day: they understand each other.

The Holy Spirit can do amazing things, according to St. Paul, dispensing gifts on all of us, for the common good. Paul lists many gifts of the spirit, and in the list he mentions the gift of languages: various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

How I wish the gift of languages fell so easily on me. After many years in Germany, I managed to speak and think and dream in German, but in the 45 years since I left Berlin, my facility has grown faint. I can still mumble a bit of the language, and understand quite a bit, but my familiarity with the culture is more a pleasant memory. Understanding? I think I still understand Germans historically and culturally, but there is much of our current world cultures that leave me buffaloes. Probably what we need in today's world is that we listen, and that we pray for understanding of each other.

As a student of history, I can name many instances when we humans refused to listen to each other, assuming we knew it all, and the result was often murder and mayhem, wars and misfortune. Many times in history there has been shouting, but not much listening. When Jesus visited his disciples after his resurrection, he breathed on them to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit. And then he defined what that meant: forgiveness. If we forgive others, their sins are forgiven. But if we don't, their sins remain. I think that is what has happened in the past two thousand years: we not only don't listen, but we don't forgive.

There was a movement to encourage communication and understanding in the late nineteenth century, by a Polish-Jewish ophthalmologist named L.L. Zamenhof. He aimed to create an easy, homogenized language that anyone can learn quickly, and thus encourage peace and understanding. The made-up language is called Esperanto, and although it has had many adherents since Zamenhof presented it to the world in 1887, in a book called International Language, it never really caught on. The name Esperanto sounds like the Spanish word for hope, Esperanza, and the creation of this simple language was indeed based on hope for peace and reconciliation.

Alas, that didn't work out. And the hopes of many of us that modern languages can do the same thing of encouraging communication, has been dealt a terrible blow, perhaps

indicating our laziness or our desire to keep to ourselves. In the early 1970s, when I was working on my first master's degree at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, the university announced that it was dropping the requirement for a foreign language for the bachelor or arts degree. Studying a foreign language is not easy, and the university didn't want to burden the students with this basic task. By dumping the requirement, they were saying that it didn't matter anymore. This was in 1972, and I suspect most colleges and universities followed suit. In effect, they erected a barrier to our understanding of other cultures. In effect, they said, Let everyone learn English! I was working at the town newspaper at the time, writing a weekly column of my own outrageous opinions, when this was announced. I wrote a column of objection. That column received more positive comments than anything else I wrote. At least in 1972, many people were shocked at the cultural slap. Now, well, I'm guessing very few people care. Everyone speaks English, right?

Our scripture account of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, hovering over the crowd in Jerusalem and facilitating understanding through language, is an inspiration in our own time. We need inspiration, an inhaling of the Holy Spirit, in desperate times, when different opinions are being hurled, right and left, with no attempt to understand the other. I imagine God putting God's hands over divine ears and muttering, "Will they ever learn?"

We can do our part, seeking inspiration in quieter forms, in gentleness, truly listening to the opinions of others, and sowing peace and understanding. That is what happened on Pentecost Sunday long ago, and we can encourage it today.