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The Power of Listening: The Power of the Spirit

Today, we celebrate Pentecost. One of the most miraculous events in the life of the church. As the Holy Ghost ignited those gathered on fire, with the power of God's Spirit. A force so mighty it brings together the masses connecting them to one another through their ability to share in the vulnerable and loving act of listening across difference and conversing despite barriers. Growing the church as the disciples in turn baptized 3,000 that very day. It might be, in my mind, one of the most miraculous occurrences in the entirety of our Bible, that being a vast and varied crowd's ability to actually gather together, listen, hear, and be changed through conversation with one another. Because let's face it, how often do we find ourselves in situations with others different from ourselves, from other cultures, other languages, even the other sides of the aisle, and are able to not only share in idle chit chat, but actually in life changing conversation. So life changing, in fact, that we go and give our whole selves and life over to that conversation! I mean, if we could figure out and actually execute this event here and now, in today's world, we'd be on fire! Except, that event was not a one time experience, it's still going on here and now. That same Spirit, the one that ascended this day over 2,000 years ago, is still very much alive, moving, working, and enacting in our lives and the world, so... maybe it's really just up to us.

A month or so ago my husband, Drew, shared a new book with me, entitled "Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection." Wondering if it was a hint that I needed to communicate better, or a useful tool for our lives together and in the world, I was intrigued and decided to crack it open. One of the chapters I found most interesting, and probably useful, was that on listening. In the world psychology, the prevailing theory, for the last few decades, has been that "in order to understand others—and persuade them to listen to us—we should engage in what is known perspective taking: We should try and see a situation from the other person's perspective and show them we empathize." But, this methodology can lead to a very lopsided conversation and relationship, one based solely on assuming we understand where the other is coming from. When in fact to truly understand where another is coming from we really need to start by asking questions. Which is what University of Chicago, psychology professor, Nicholas Epley has spent his entire career researching, writing on, and teaching about, through what he has coined as the "How Do We Feel?" conversation. A conversation that allows individuals to become vulnerable with one another, enough so that they might engage into meaningful conversations and deeper connections with others. The How Do We Feel? Conversation can be as simple as asking more questions, about how another feels, instead of simply the facts of their life. Or even more broadly, it can just be follow up questions like "tell me more?"

While we might assume the man who has become an expert in the psychological field of communication would also be an expert listener, the truth is his story didn't start out that way. As a high school student Epley, fell into the same vices many teenagers do, drinking too much, driving too fast, doing both at the same time. And, after two run-ins with the law, Epley found himself in the office of a counselor, who for the first time, during this season of his life, asked him... why? She didn't lecture him, or tell him why not. She simply asked him questions like, "why were you drinking?" "How would you have reacted if your car hit someone?" "What would happen to your life if you had been arrested, or injured, or killed another person?" And, as Epley began to contemplate her questions, he began to open up, in turn uncovering and becoming in touch with his own emotions. As he shared his beliefs and values, how he felt, what he was anxious about, and what he feared with the counselor, he finally began to see a future and path forward for himself and his life.

As we celebrate Pentecost and witness the story of our Spirit descending upon the disciples with a violent wind, hearing how "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them... a tongue [resting]

on each of them...” We might remember, how, as we are told in Acts, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” But, what is more interesting to me, is not so much the disciples ability to speak in strange tongues, but those gathered’s ability to hear them and listen. Because it was that act, of hearing and listening, that allowed their lives to be changed! As we witness the amazement of the crowds, who ask the understandable question, “how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” When they don’t even speak in our tongue. To which Peter responds, giving voice to the church’s story, God’s hope, and our shared salvation, as we hear him recount from the book of Joel, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” In turn, reminding us that our connection to one another, our ability to move beyond division and share our stories and in listen to others is as easy as turning to the other and remembering that they too are part of God’s creation and part of the Divine Spirit. Maybe even remembering Jesus’ words, we hear this morning from John, “if I go, I will send [the Spirit] to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.” Because the truth is we worry about these things, I would argue, way more than we worry about simply being with one another, listening to each other, and truly loving the other, without judgment or condemnation.

“When you describe how you feel, you’re giving someone a map of the things you care about,” Epley, the psychology professor from Supcommunicators, states. Which “is why the *How Do We Feel?* conversation is so crucial. Every discussion is shaped by our emotions, and when we bring those feelings to the surface—when we share them and ask others to share with us—we begin to see how we might align.” Which is why instead of focusing on perspective taking we might begin to focus on perspective getting, instead of assuming what we think we know, actually asking others to describe their own inner lives, values, beliefs, feelings, and the things they care about the most. Maybe then, we might actually be able to begin to speak in the “languages” of others, or maybe even more importantly, to hear others from different “languages”, or perspectives. I wonder how we might invite the Spirit to ignite our lives, our community, our world, if we were to begin to enter into more “How Do We Feel” conversations, if we were vulnerable enough to share with others and in turn make space and room for them to share with us? What would it look like? Maybe like those gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, as they began to cross barriers of language and culture, color and creed, socioeconomic status and ideological values? Maybe like the conversations shared at Coffee here at St. Paul’s on Sundays, or our Free Hot Dog Lunch at the end of the month on Wednesdays? Maybe like the relationships created through Meals on Wheels or the South Smithfield reading program? This Pentecost I pray we might allow the Spirit to ignite our souls and our lives in a way that moves us into more meaningful conversations, maybe even with those outside our own inner circles. So that we might begin to hear others stories, to share our own, and to knit them together as one story in the Spirit and one story of the Church!