

“Sacred Speaking, Holy Hearing” / Acts 1:1-21 / 8 June 2014

Happy Pentecost Day to you. May the winds of the Spirit stir in all the stuffy upstairs rooms of your life, blowing away dust, carrying out cobwebs, purging you of all those things that need to be gone. May those winds of change stir in our church and in our lives, bringing new hope, new insights, a whole new day. And please God, may the winds of that deathless Spirit blow through all the many locked rooms of our world, the places where deals are made, where peace and war are brokered, where the destinies of the millions are determined! Come, Holy Spirit, teach us at last to hear one another!

Back in the middle of the last decade, it became popular to make movies where three or four storylines are told simultaneously, and you don't see how those various stories are connected until the very end of the film. I like that kind of movie because it depicts the world as it truly is: interdependent. We are, all of us, bound to the fates and the destinies of people we will never even know, perfect strangers, whose languages we do not speak, and whose ways of life it would take us decades to understand. *Syriana* was one of those movies, and so was the film *Crash*. But I think by far the best of that multi-plot drama style was the movie *Babel*, with Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt.

I'll give you the Sunday morning summary of the film, trying not to spoil any of the many storylines, for in case you haven't seen it yet. Listen for the way one person's sad decision (her suicide) sets off a chain of events that reaches all the way around the globe, wreaking havoc in the lives of strangers she would never meet. The opening scenes are in the hilly deserts of Morocco. It's a typical North African scene, blindingly bright. A Japanese big game hunter has come through the area on a safari, and he's left his high powered rifle as a gift for a local man, who in turn sells it to a sheep farmer. The sheep farmer lends the gun to his two sons and tells them to shoot any predators who might try to kill his sheep. Of course, two boys can't resist testing the gun out; it supposedly shoots bullets as far as three kilometers, so they take to shooting at passing vehicles.

Buses and trucks make easier targets than cars, but when they shoot a passing bus, they end up putting a bullet through the shoulder of an American tourist played by Cate Blanchett. She and her husband, played by Brad Pitt, are a San Diego couple who have come to North Africa to nurse their sadness over the loss of a child, and to work on their troubled marriage. They make the bus stop in the first village to look for medical help, finding none but a sheep doctor to sew up the woman's shoulder. But the bus takes off and leaves them there; the other tourists are afraid of more attacks. They're stuck in a desert hamlet with only one telephone, their lifeline to the world. They must get a call through to their Mexican nanny—an illegal immigrant—to let her know that they'll be getting home much later than they expected, and she'll need to keep the couple's other two children until they get back to San Diego. In time, the shooting draws the attention of the media and becomes an international incident; the US government assumes that it was a terrorist attack and pressures Morocco to act.

Moroccan police trace the gun through the sheep farmer and back to the Japanese hunter, who gave the gun away because his wife had used it to kill herself. Reeling from her mother's suicide, the man's sad and lonely teenage daughter is struggling with suicidal thoughts, too. But then the Mexican nanny in San Diego steals the show. She's nervous that her employers—still stuck in Morocco—won't make it home in time for her to attend her son's wedding across the border near Tijuana. She can't miss her own son's wedding, but she's unable to find anyone else to keep the children.

The nanny loves these children, who are not her own. She's been helping to raise them for twelve years and even calls them “my little ones.” And so, she takes them with her into Mexico; they all go to the wedding together. On the way home, a relative is driving them far too fast across the desert, headed for the American border. He's drunk and argues with the border patrol. They won't let him into the country and want to know why two so-called “illegals” have two American kids in their car. The driver ends up running from the police, getting chased across the desert, where he dumps the nanny and the children. Come morning, the poor nanny realizes that they're in big trouble, with no water in the desert. The kids are worn out, so she leaves them in the sparse shade of a yucca bush and tries to find help. She's apprehended by the border patrol and never returns for the kids, who—

fortunately--are also discovered by the police. Although she's lived sixteen years in America and deeply loves the American children, she's deported back to Mexico. She never even gets a chance to tell the children—or their parents—that she had not abandoned them, that she was apprehended before she could return. In one of the final scenes, you see her walking across the desert on the Mexican side, where her newly-married son is waiting to pick her up. And she's still wearing the same red dress she wore to the wedding, now ripped, and tattered, and dirty.

Now, that's a lot to absorb in four minutes. But the point I'm trying to make is this: By the end of the movie, you sense the fact that all these strangers are mysteriously bound together in a drama that none of them has chosen. They don't know each other. They couldn't even communicate if they met face to face. The movie is *Babel*; it's a confusion of languages, passions, and drives, all colliding into chaos and ultimately sorrow. See how one person's sadness spreads and pulls perfect strangers into its orbit. A woman's suicide in Japan puts an unwanted gun out there into the world; it ends up wounding an American woman in Morocco, an event that winds up getting that same woman's children stuck in the California desert and another woman deported back to Mexico. You never even learn the fates of most of the people who play their parts then disappear: the Moroccan boys, the sad teenager in Japan, the Mexican driver, running from the police. We don't know if the American couple's marriage survives all the extra trauma of the incident. I wonder if you've ever set off a chain of events that reached around the globe, all without even knowing it. My guess is that, in some way, perhaps you have, albeit less dramatic than the one in the movie. People come into conflict not usually because someone is bad and someone is good, but because they cannot hear or understand each other. And yet, above the chaos and din of human desire, in its many forms, can we hear the one universal heart cry of all humanity? When it comes right down to it, we all want the same things, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Cretans and Arabs. We all seek the same things: Love me. Make me feel safe. Care for my children. Give me a good cause to live for. Promise me there will be enough. We all want the same things. If only we could hear one another!

It's Pentecost, the birthday of the church. Many of us are familiar with the ancient account that we read each year in the early summer. The disciples are in their same old upstairs room again, all together in one place, when out of nowhere they experience a shared vision: a new wind blows among them, accompanied by tongues of fire. They begin to speak all the languages of Babel, and some onlookers think it's a drunken revel at 9am, all of them babbling like mad men. But others hear not senseless gobbledygook; they hear blessing, and wisdom, and sacred secrets all in their mother tongues. This odd experience at Pentecost emboldens a frightened band of disciples to go out and change the world. But why did some folks in that cosmopolitan crowd hear nothing but noise, whereas others heard ancient wonders revealed, in the native language of each?

Gift of Pentecost, gift of the Spirit, empowerment to live in courageous and faith-filled ways in a world that doesn't always share the vision! The strange new languages, or “tongues,” are not the greatest marvel at Pentecost. There is a religious phenomenon known as “glossolalia,” or “speaking in tongues” that's not unique to our the American Pentecostals of the megachurches. The whirling dervishes of Islam do it. Certain Jewish mystical sects used to speak in tongues, as did the Shakers and even the Quakers, those dignified lovers of justice in their buckled shoes and powdered wigs who laid out the streets of Philadelphia and named them after the native trees. But it's not the strange new speech in this text that catches my attention. As I said, such marvels have occurred from time to time in instances of heightened religious emotion. No, to me the greater marvel is the gift of “new hearing” that occurred when onlookers heard in this seeming babble something meaningful, something holy. To hear oneself in the chaotic cries of the other, to recognize good news in their joy and bad news in their distress, to be attuned to the universal language of human longing, to know oneself even in one who is dissimilar: is that not to be filled with the very Spirit of God? Many heard a drunken revelry, and they scoffed, but some heard joyous proclamation, and to them it sounded like home.

It can be hard to see oneself, to hear oneself, in the stranger. Two old Pittsburghers were sitting on their stoops in Bloomfield when a foreign woman stopped her rented car and asked them directions to Pitt. Because she thought the men looked Italian, and because she was self-conscious about her poor English, she tried them first in Italian. No luck, the two old men just stared at her. Then she tried German, still nothing. In desperation, she asked them in Spanish how to get to Pitt. The two old fellows just nodded and smiled politely. So at last she broke out her halting English: "Please you can me direct University of Pittsburgh?" The elderly gentlemen understood this; they gave her directions, and off she went. One fellow looked at the other and said, "I wonder if we shouldn't learn a second language?" The second guy replied, "Why? That woman knew four, and the only one that worked was English?"

It's easier to hear ourselves in some people than in others. One of the joys—and indeed one of the sorrows—of parenthood is to see oneself in one's children, as they grow older. It's a joy because it causes you to marvel. Where did that kid pick up one of my quirky mannerisms? The nervous fidgeting of the fingers, the distracted way of only half-listening? How did that kid start using words that I used at her age and haven't used in fifteen years—except when I'm with friends from college? How did my child learn to say "dude," a word that has long since been replaced by its contemporary counterpart, "bro." I don't think I've ever called my daughter "dude." And I'm not sure she's seen me interacting with old friends from college very much. So where does it come from? Far more troubling is to see your child going through many of the same frustrations and anxieties that you remember all too well yourself, and perhaps even reacting much as you did. The hardest part is the realization that you never would have turned to your parents for help, and neither will she. Yes, we can see ourselves in our children, in our loved ones. We can sometimes even hear ourselves in the things they say and the way they speak. There's a related phenomenon of hearing ourselves speak and suddenly realizing that we sound just like one of our parents. That's no fun.

And yet, it's easy to have sympathy when we sense a bit of ourselves in another person. It's harder to see or hear ourselves in those people we do not love. There are people in your life, too, in whom you just cannot hear anything of yourself. You know where I cannot hear myself? In most of the political personalities on TV, with their angry, extremist rhetoric! I can't hear myself in their fearmongering and black-and-white views! I cannot hear myself in certain kinds of religious people; they're an endless source of embarrassment for me. My fashion sense was recently called into question—that will happen when you hit your mid-forties—and so I did a Google search to read up on the fashion issue in question. But the fashionista who wrote the article had such strong opinions about apparel and appearances. I pitied him a little for caring so much about something that seemed so trivial to me. I turned away feeling smugly superior about my lack of fashion sense. I couldn't hear myself in him, and it made me glad for my outdated shoes. The international news seems to be construed in such a way that we find it hard to sympathize with the angry, and the desperate, with the bitterly fanatical cries of the dispossessed of many lands. We cannot hear ourselves in them. But what if we could?

A Lutheran pastor in Minnesota writes about his experience of being at the state capitol when Minnesota was considering gay marriage. He says that it was a perfect cacophony of conflicting voices, creating total pandemonium that echoed all under the great rotunda of the capitol building. Some were holding signs and crying out in support of expanding the state's definition of marriage. Others, just as impassioned, cried out against it. And on both sides of the issue, people claimed God as an ally. Some were convinced that to change the definition of marriage would provoke the wrath of God, for it defies their understanding of natural law. Others asserted that God calls us to ensure equal rights for everyone. It was clamorous confusion, but, the minister writes, from where he was standing on the third floor balcony, all you could hear was "one great cry offered up from human hopes and fears...one human family crying out for blessing." And it's true. People on both sides of that issue—and every issue—all want the same things. Acceptance, security, a better world for their children, enough. Jews and gentiles, Cretans and Arabs, Muslims and Christians, Pentecostals and Presbyterians,

Republicans and Democrats, and truly, terrorist and victim: We want essentially the same things out of life. We want a voice. We want some power over our own destiny. We want to be left in peace. We differ radically in how we pursue those desires because we all come from different starting places. The desperately poor and powerless may turn to drastic measures that appear downright evil to those who have some degree of power and the luxury of playing by the rules. But truly, we want the same things!

The gift of Pentecost is yours if you're truly ready to claim it. Can you listen to your enemy and hear in him or her the universal longings of the human condition? What visions, what dreams do we all embrace, in the end? Is it too much to live for those things that have the best chance of bringing that vision about? Can we hear a reasonable voice not above the din of life, but in it? Can we hear the crowds calling out for a good future for their children? Can we hear people just asking for their own handful of years to be lived out with enough to eat, with the love of others? Hollywood is right to remind us of something that our society typically tells us to ignore: the fact that my life is linked by invisible bonds to the illegal immigrant, to the dirt-poor Arab of North Africa, to the urgently sad teenager in Japan. In the cacophony of modern life, in all our conflicting cries, our human cries of hope and fear, surely God hears one unified, harmonious cry, one human cry, calling out for understanding and grace. It sounds like complete disorder, it sounds like Babel from where we're standing, but from a distance it is the song of humanity. The point of Pentecost is to break down the walls that have divided us for millennia. The point of Pentecost is to hear yourself in the other. Who is the other for you? Amen.