

7 Easter – Year B – May 24, 2009
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19
Susan E. Wilmot

It was always the same faces and the same format. We sat in a semi-circle with a palpable air of trepidation. There was no question that I would show up, but how much I would be able to participate was definitely debatable. The woman next to me was from Turkey. She too was willing to learn, but her anxious hands smeared sweaty prints across the arm rests of her chair. I knew exactly how she felt. Then the dreaded moment would come when the teacher asked questions of each of us in turn, stretching each to the limits of our vocabulary. Limit being the operative word, at least in my world. It felt like an eternity, even though it was just an hour a week of language lab. Learning a new language requires commitment, persistence, and a lot of practice. All communities have their common languages in order to communicate and name the people and things around us. Whatever language it is -- Spanish, French, or languages like sign, shorthand, text messaging, or the language of God -- at a minimum, learning the basics is essential to our sense of belonging to any or all of these groups. I think I can confidently say that you and I are mostly fluent in the basic language of the cultural milieu in which live. Even though I walked to work this morning, the majority of us drove here – so we are skilled in the dialect of vehicle and rules of the road. We may well have listened to the radio or a CD, switched on the TV, or brewed a pot of coffee this morning as well. Meaning we also have the hang of the lingo associated with common technical conveniences. Okay, notice I didn't ask how many of us actually know how to program a DVD player or set the clock! We all know that requires an advanced degree in techno-speak.

“Jesus prayed for his disciples,” says John in our Gospel reading today. Make no mistake here, prayer is one of the basic and essential languages of God, and we know from all the Gospel accounts that Jesus practices it a lot. Which tells us that if we consider ourselves to be followers of Christ, you and I are also called to pray – both alone and in community. The Word made flesh prayed for His disciples then, and as we discover in the Book of Hebrews, continues to intercede for us all even now, seated in glory at the right hand of our Father in heaven. This portion of John's Gospel is known as Jesus' high-priestly prayer. In context, Jesus is preparing for His death and transitioning the disciples into new roles and responsibilities. In business terms we'd call it succession planning. Jesus has spent the last three years of His life in all aspects of ministry, teaching His disciples in the Way, so that they can continue His mission in and to the world.

Some years ago, someone gave me a short framed story with a picture of a small circle of people holding hands. Appropriately for today -- the Sunday after the Ascension -- the story reads in part, “When Jesus returned to heaven, he was asked by an angel: ‘What have you left behind to carry out the work?’ Jesus answers: ‘A little band of men and women who love me.’... ‘Is there nothing more?’ [the angel replies.] ‘No,’ says Jesus.” No pressure here or anything, but we are it! In Jesus' prayer, He's specifically asking God to protect His disciples from the evil one who is loose in the world. Since you and I are so in tune with the language of the world, including sin and the knowledge of good and evil, why would we, as Christians, need this prayer of protection? What is it about the idiom of the world that is so antagonistic or antithetical to *the Word*? The prayer is for you and me, so we better know the reason why it's so important to Jesus, and what it means in our lives of loving discipleship and service. We have seen it over and over again in Scripture. While God undoubtedly declared creation to be good, from the very first we just couldn't resist taking matters into our own hands. The more literate we become in the language of God, the more we realize that descriptors like rebellious, disobedient, or sinful pull us away from God. Humanity's sinfulness has twisted all that God created good, distorting and tainting the world. We have created our own pictures of goodness now. It tends to look a lot like our own reflections in the hazy mirror of life, and not nearly enough like the clear revelation of Jesus. It's a bit like the story of Cinderella. The mean sisters, ugly in their hatefulness are always going places, while the true beauty of the family is locked away.

The true beauty of humanity and of God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet the world would rather not see, hear or receive the truth, because it is so much easier to listen to lies that make us feel better about ourselves. Satan, the father of lies, and his followers promote evil in the world and provide endless amusing diversions to keep us from focusing on God and caring for others. Early in the Gospel of John we read, “Jesus was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,” (John 1:10-12). As children of God, we have our work cut out for us to speak the truth of the Gospel in love, to a world that hates Truth so much it nailed Him to a cross. Can we do this in our own strength? No. And how can we speak Gospel truth without studying the Word?

By a delightful God-incidence, in several conversations I’ve had this week, I’ve heard the same message about learning a new language. Even for those of us who really struggle linguistically, it is way easier to pick it up when we’re immersed in it. That is, surrounded by people who speak it relatively fluently, who are willing to teach us and coach us in its nuances, and help us practice. If you and I are committed to Christ’s mission of reconciling the world to God, then we need to be committed to a community of faith where we participate in learning, growing, and sharing the Word of God. You and I are named as God’s children. And as any loving parent would, God desires that we not only have knowledge of His characteristics, as revealed in Jesus Christ, but continue Jesus’ work of revealing God’s character in the world. We can’t share a good story until we hear it or read the book, and we can’t hear it or read the book with any kind of understanding until we learn the language of the storyteller. And that is why every single child of God is responsible for being involved in Christian formation. Jesus spent a lot of His time with the disciples, helping them to become competent agents of the Word. We have great adult Bible studies and Biblically-informed seminars here every week at 9am in the parish hall. We have wonderful children’s and youth lessons available right here every week at 9 o’clock in the Chapel. We are getting ready for an exciting Vacation Bible School in order to share God’s truth with all the children of this community. We have youth confirmation classes every month. By God’s graciousness the doors of learning in this place are open. Will you walk through? Will you bring a friend, your children or your grandchildren? Let our prayer be the same as the Psalmist who once said, “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth;” (Psalm 86:11).

Knowledge of God is not a natural possession. By God’s grace, it is a life-long process of continuous learning for all God’s children, of all ages. We do not have the innate ability to engage and respond to the world as ministers of His Word, unless we first sit down at the feet of Jesus to listen and learn. Here is what the Word of God says through the Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Unlike those language labs of long ago, you and I have no need to be anxious or afraid to joyfully explore God’s language. What a gracious gift this community of faith has to offer. Together we can learn and grow in the Word, and go out with confidence, hope and joy to transform the world.

Amen.