Sometimes it seems as if my dear Nancy and I are speaking different languages, which makes it difficult to communicate. For example, when we have to go to some function and I am all ready, I'll ask her, “How long until you're ready?” When I ask that question I really want to know exactly what I am asking. If she is going to take 15 minutes, I'll fire up the computer and get my invocation composed. If she is only going to take 5 minutes, I might just pick up the latest issue of the Economist and pick up where I left off. What determines what I will do is her answer to my simple question.

Her response will not be so simple. She'll say, “I'll be ready in a sec.” Now a sec is an indeterminate period of time. It could literally mean a second, which it never does, or it could mean a minute, which it never does. But whether it means 5 minutes or 15 minutes is anyone's guess. So I will seek clarification, asking: “Does that mean closer to 5 minutes or 15 minutes?” Big mistake. Now she thinks I am badgering her—again. She'll respond, “I don't rush you. Just give me a sec and I'll be there.”

I'm not trying to rush her. I don't care if she takes 15 minutes instead of 5, as long as we aren’t going to be late. No, I literally want to know exactly what I am asking. It is not a trick question. It is not an accusation. It is not a thinly veiled slight. So I will sit down and turn on the computer and about the time it boots up she will come down the stairs and say, “What are you doing. I told you I’d be down in a sec. I thought you were in such a big hurry. You're weird.”

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But it is not just men and women who speak different languages. The same author wrote another New Your Times best seller entitled: You Were Always Mom’s Favorite!: Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives. And yet another entitled: You're Wearing THAT?: Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation. So you see,
even among the same gender people speak different languages or, to be more precise, speak the same language differently.

The title of our message today is: “Now You’re Speaking My Language.” Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian Church. Just before the risen Christ’s ascension into heaven he promised his followers: …you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8). Up to this point Jesus’ followers have been laying low so as to avoid persecution. But soon they are going to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to boldly witness to his resurrection—not just in Jerusalem and not just in Judea, but throughout the whole world. In short, a new world religion is being born.

The moment of birth occurred a week later on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the Greek word for 50. If you were here last Sunday you learned that there were three feasts held each year in Jerusalem. All Jewish males were obligated to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for each of these three feasts every year. The first feast commemorated the Passover. The second feast was called the Feast of Weeks because it occurred a week of weeks after Passover. A week is seven days. Seven times seven is 49. So a week of weeks is 49 day. The Feast of weeks began on the day after a week of weeks, or on the 50th day. Hence it also came to be called Pentecost.

You will recall that Jesus was crucified during Passover. According to the book of Acts, the risen Christ appeared to the apostles for 40 days before he was taken up to heaven. If we add three days for the period between his death and resurrection, we have seven days remaining until Pentecost. Our text begins: When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting (Verses 1-2).

They were at the 12 Apostles (Judas had been replaced by Matthias). A sound like a violent wind comes from heaven and surrounds them, and that is not all. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Verses 3-4). This turns out to be quite a sight and sound and spectacle, and it attracts the attention of others. Remember, this is a feast to which Jewish males are obligated to attend. From near and far they come to Jerusalem packing the city and dotting its landscape with their tents.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language (Verses 5-6). That would be bewildering. Amazed and perplexed they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine” (Verses 12-13). I don’t know what the connection is between “day drinking” and speaking in myriad foreign languages, but I guess you have to account for it one way or another.
The apostle Peter has another explanation. Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams (Verses 14-17).

Centuries before a prophet named Joel had looked forward to an evolution in God’s relationship with his people. In Old Testament—old covenant—times God’s spirit rested on a king or prophet of his choosing who would lead God’s people. But New Testament—new covenant—times were coming, God says through Joel, when I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Jesus was the beginning of New Testament times and, as we have seen, he alerted his followers to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter is saying, “this is it. This is what Jesus and Joel foretold.”

For example, remember those tongues of fire? Fire has always been a sign of God’s presence with his people. During the exodus from Egypt a pillar of fire guided God’s people by night. There was a consuming fire on Mt. Sinai when God gave the 10 Commandments. Likewise, a fire hovered over the wilderness tabernacle. These were all signs of God’s divine presence with his people as a corporate entity. Under the new covenant established by Jesus and inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit now rests on each believer individually. From Pentecost onward the emphasis is upon a personal relationship between God and each believer through the Spirit—no intermediary required.

By the way, the Greek word for “spirit” is the same Greek word for “wind,” which is why the outpouring of the Spirit is also accompanied by the sound of a howling wind. We must always ask “what must the text mean for people who thought and wrote as they did then?” Jesus spoke in creative and imaginative ways, and the authors of biblical texts wrote in creative and imaginative ways. If we are to be faithful to the text, we must seek to understand them as they are communicated.

But that is not what we do. No, we impose some sort of rigid literalism upon the texts which distracts us from their timeless message. A case in point is the one feature of our text we have not yet considered—speaking in tongues. In our text, that means speaking in foreign languages that we have never learned before but that are understood by people who have learned them. Fifteen linguistic groups are represented among the hearers. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? (Verses 7-8).

There is a movement within Protestant Christianity called Pentecostalism. It is huge. Worldwide it is ¼ the size of Roman Catholicism (translation: it has 279 million adherents, and growing fast in the global south. Some, but by all means not all,
Pentecostals take a very literal view of scriptures and insist that if a person does not speak in tongues they are not true believers. So if you go to their services people regularly express what are called “ecstatic utterances.” These sound like other human languages but they are not, because they cannot be understood by anyone who has not been given the gift of interpreting “spiritual languages” (as opposed to earthly languages).

When Paul uses the word “tongues” he is not talking about human languages but ecstatic utterances. Even in his day they were a contentious subject. He writes to about those speaking in tongues at the church at Corinth: *Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me* (1 Corinthians 14:9-11).

Ecstatic utterances are one thing. Speaking in other languages is another. Our text is about the latter and what is it trying to tell us? That far from being a standardized spiritual experience, a personal relationship with God is, well, personal. It is unique for each believer. It is the height of irony that anyone whose religious expression includes ecstatic utterances should impose that as a test of membership on everyone else. People speak different religious languages. God intends to reach them all by speaking their language.

What good is it if Pentecostals condemn Catholics, and Catholics condemn Methodists and Methodists condemn other Methodists who are charismatics? Let’s step outside of Christendom for just a moment. Who does not feel a little glee with we hear in the news about how Sunni and Shiite Muslims are not getting along. When they are divided, one can be pitted against the other and they become weakened. There are, but the way, many more flavors of Muslims, Sufis for example, which are further divided into 14 orders.

The same holds true for the body of Christ. It is made up of many and varied parts—each different from the others. I have a hands and feet, eyes and ears, and hopefully they are working in concert with one another. For if one foot goes forward and the other goes backward, I’m going to look pretty silly. So it is with the body of Christ. To those on the outside it looks pretty silly when the many and varied parts say to each other: “You are not part of the body of Christ.”

So our text on this Day of Pentecost does not announce the birthday of some one-size-fits-all church. God, in his wisdom, has allowed for a great variety of religious expression—a great variety of spiritual languages communicating the same timeless spiritual truths in their own fashion—truths about forgiveness and loving neighbor as self and our need for God. We can be grateful for that because there is a church that feels like home for every believer, a church that speaks our language, a church that
acknowledges the Holy Spirit within us and a church that allows us to have a personal relationship with God. That is the church at its best and we celebrate its birthday today.

May each of us be faithfully unique witnesses to Christ, living testimonies of his saving power and deeply personal expressions of his love. Not for a single tongue, but O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.