

“Why we speak (or don’t)”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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by Patrick Heery

I want to try a little experiment. I’m going to start a slogan, and I want you to finish it. For instance, if I were to say, “Just,” you’d say, “Do it.” Nike. OK? Let’s give it a go. “Like a good neighbor…” (State Farm is there). “The Few. The Proud…” (The Marines). “Good to the…” (last drop). “A diamond is…” (forever). “I’ve fallen and I…” (can’t get up).

Advertisers have spent countless hours trying to come up with a few simple words that speak directly to an essential need or desire in people.

Today, many of us take for granted that an engagement ring has a diamond in it. But it wasn’t always so. At the beginning of the 20th century, huge numbers of diamonds were being mined, but most people didn’t want them. Diamonds were seen as something for only the very wealthy. And by 1919, diamond demand and prices were in decline. The diamond company De Beers was in trouble.

So, they hired an ad agency. And all those feelings you have about diamonds (their romance, their symbolism of love, their desirability) are the result of that ad agency. They hired Hollywood actors and fashion designers to wear diamonds, raising diamond sales by more than 50 percent. But the kicker was a slogan devised in 1947: “A diamond is forever.” It’s been proclaimed the “slogan of the century,” and De Beers still uses it to this day.

Indeed, just a few years after the debut of this new slogan, in 1951, eight out of 10 American brides got a diamond. Four words turned a rock, an intrinsically worthless object that was on the brink of business collapse, into that one thing we seek: eternal love, on which some people spend two months’ salary.

Words have power, a fact that the disciples quickly learn in our passage from Acts this morning.

Jerusalem is abuzz with activity. It is Pentecost for the Jewish people, the celebration of the reaping of harvest and of the moment when God gave the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And in the midst of this commotion is our motley crew of disciples who have been through *a lot* in the last two months. They have witnessed the brutal crucifixion of their leader and savior; they have been betrayed by one of their own. They have seen Christ rise from the dead and then rise to heaven. And now they’re on their own, facing these huge crowds, wondering how they can possibly tell them about all that has happened and what it means.

Their task makes the diamond challenge seem paltry. For if they mess this up, if they use the wrong words, they’re not just going out of business for some worthless object; they’re undermining everything Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected for. They’re letting God down.

Talk about pressure. I mean if it's hard to come up with a slogan for Coca-Cola, how much harder is it to find the words to sum up God? Or faith?

Suddenly, something amazing happens, though. *They* don't find the words; the words find them. God's Spirit fills their bodies, and speech, in dozens of languages, pours out of them. For the first time, the people in this crowd are hearing about God in a way that strikes straight to the heart.

It is a dramatic moment with wind and fire and quaking earth. God is revealed and shakes the souls of those present. Tongues flow with world-changing truth. On that day, 3,000 people are baptized. The first Christian sermon is preached. These people's whole way of life is changed—they're filled with awe; they share their possessions so that none has need; they go home with "glad and generous hearts."

If you're like me, you long to experience this same passionate and transformative encounter with God. You want to come to worship and *feel* God. You want your whole life to be swept up in this crazy love, and community, and justice, and purpose.

But if you're like me, you also fear what such an experience may ask of us. It may require that we have a Pentecost moment of our own, and I'm not so sure how confident I feel in summing up the gospel to people who have never heard it before. This means that we have to actually speak about our faith... to strangers... to people... out there.

The prospect of Pentecost is troubling. We're talking about evangelism.

And I've seen evangelism. I remember a "pastor" who would come to my college campus every month or two. He didn't have a relationship with the students; he didn't know us. He just stood on his soapbox—yes, he actually had a box—and would wag his finger at students passing by, shouting at them about how they're going to hell, calling them names I dare not repeat here, telling them that God hated them. And I remember thinking to myself, that's not the God I know. And I remember also how, when I was walking to and from church on Sunday mornings, I would turn my Bible over because I didn't want people seeing that embossed gold lettering B-I-B-L-E and thinking that I was like that hateful man.

I'm happy to proclaim the gospel through my actions; I'm happy to speak about it here in church. But to speak about it out there, well, that's intimidating. What if we offend or hurt someone? What if we get it wrong?

We might, after all, get pulled into a conversation that we are woefully unprepared for: Who is God? Why does a good and powerful God allow bad things to happen? How can God have a son? And for that matter, what does it mean to be Presbyterian? What does it mean to belong to Westminster?

Well, you know, we have this thing called Session... and oh yeah, there was this guy named John Calvin... and um, we like organ music... and uh, we're nice people.

That is not a Pentecost answer. Where's the fire? Where's the deep truth of why you are here? Where's God?

You see, that's what the disciples discovered that day, so many years ago, in Jerusalem. They found what made them burn and come alive.

Contrary to what they may have been feeling, they weren't alone when they faced that crowd. Oh no, the Spirit was working in them what they themselves could not do. And after that, all they had to do was let the fire glow.

I have no doubt that fear still gripped their hearts, much like our own. I have no illusion that they were suddenly perfect. We know from this passage that their words don't convince everyone. Some sneer and make fun of them. Moreover, this is only the beginning of the Book of Acts; they will go on to disagree and make mistakes. The Spirit has to keep coming back, with new visions. Sometimes, in fact, it's the people they're trying to convert who end up teaching *them* something about God.

But that is why the words do not come only to Peter or to a select few. They fall upon everyone, forging a community of prophets, whose words, though just fragments of the truth, come together to form one universal language that speaks to all.

We, like the disciples, need not fret over our incomplete understanding. God is at work here. Can we trust that?

John Calvin once said that God will speak even through an evil preacher. And while I don't think I'm evil (and if I was, I sure wouldn't tell you), this is a reminder that God finds a way, no matter our words. The words will find *us*.

All we have to do is discover the fire that burns in us, our own reason for being here this Sunday, and speak that fire. Share it with others. That is the story we tell people... I am here because when I had no place else to go, these people loved me. I am here because I meet God here. I am here because this place gives me what I need to make a difference in the world. I am here because God gives me a reason to sing.

Who knows where such a story will take you? Who knows how it will change you, how it will change people around you, and how you will in turn be shaped by listening to their stories?

This is what I hope we will do together at Westminster, discovering not only our individual but also our collective Spirit story. A story we will tell in this community, a story that will bring us together as disciples. Auburn must know why we worship, why we do mission, why we care. Because it's the only way they will care.

I don't know yet what words we will speak, but I am excited to find out.

Because a fire is growing, and it beckons us to speak . . . to glow like fireflies carried on Pentecost wind, like people baptized in fire, like children of God. **Amen.**