

God talk, which is often associated with sharing our faith with others, can be difficult to get right, even among professionals. Case in point: A priest and a pastor from two local churches were standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that read, “The End Is Near! Turn yourself around before it’s too late!” They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car. The first driver sped by and yelled, “Leave us alone you religious nuts!” From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big splash. “Do you think,” said one clergyman to the other, “we should change the sign to simply say, ‘Bridge Out’?”

This weekend, we celebrate the day of Pentecost and we remember that on that day the church began to talk. And in a sense, they talked about the old bridge to God being out, but pointed to a new way to a new bridge, Jesus Christ! In today’s reading from acts, we discover that the apostles “were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” And with the help of the Holy Spirit, church members talked openly about God’s deeds of power and about the salvation that was being offered to them through Jesus.

The words spoken by Peter and the other apostles were inspirational, and they sparked an explosive growth of the Jerusalem church. Back then, and even nowadays, God-talk has the power to change lives. But it appears that in some ways we are losing our voice.

A religion writer for the New York Times, Jonathan Merritt, reported that it’s getting harder and harder to talk about God. Although more than 70 percent of us in the United States identify as Christian, most of us don’t feel comfortable speaking about our faith. According to a recent Barna survey, more than three-quarters of Americans avoid having spiritual or religious conversations. Six in 10 say that they have spiritual conversations only on rare occasions. In contrast to

these numbers apparently a meager 7 percent of Americans say that they talk about spiritual matters regularly.

So why do we struggle so badly with our God talk? Jonathan Merritt says that today, “work often takes precedence over worship, our social lives are prioritized over spiritual disciplines, and most people save their Sunday-best clothing for Monday through Friday.” Americans also feel conflicted about talking openly about their faith.

Yes, God talk can be tricky — no doubt about it! But if our faith is important to us, we should find a way to do it. Thankfully the apostle Paul gives us some guidance in his letter to the Romans, which he wrote to his fellow followers of Jesus in the capital of the Roman Empire. He knew that spiritual conversations could create tensions and arguments, and he was aware that Christians in Rome could come across as weird or as extremist. So the language he uses is very carefully chosen.

Like Paul, **we need to be careful with the language** we use in our conversations about faith. A Christian author named J.R. Briggs says that if you ask someone with no church experience what it means to “feel called,” they might think you’re “referring to the phone vibrating in their pocket.” Although Briggs has been a pastor for more than 15 years, he still doesn’t know exactly what people mean when they say goodbye with the words, “Be blessed.” He is also aware that phrases from Scripture can be confusing — being healed “by the blood of the Lamb” and giving your “tithes and offerings” can sound like religious jargon and be mystifying to people outside the church.

In other words, it might simply be a matter of knowing our audience. It’s fine to talk about being washed “in the blood of the Lamb” with someone who knows the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and all parts in between, but trying to explain that our sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus to a neighbor

who's just moved in next door? Maybe that's not always such a good idea until we get to know them. Fortunately, Paul doesn't make such mistakes in his God talk to the Romans. And not only is he careful with the language he uses, but he also talks about values, rather than dogma or religious principles.

Oh, yes, Paul is well-known for his theological arguments, and his letter to the Romans is hardly considered bedtime reading. Yet, in our lesson this morning he speaks clearly about **life in God's family**, something that most people desire for themselves and for the people they love. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God," writes Paul, meaning that we are children of God when we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of God.

So what does that look like? Paul says elsewhere in Romans that we should "let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord." Love, mutual affection, honor, having an aversion to evil, being filled with passion or zeal; these words are not confusing, and can be understood by anyone and everyone, inside or outside the church. All are marks of a true Christian, seen in the life of a person who is led by the Spirit of God into the family of God.

And what can we say about God directly? Paul talks about God once again by referring to family. God is like a father who has adopted us — chosen us — to be his children. This means at least three things: We are chosen; We can talk to God; We are his heirs. Let's look at each of these briefly to get a better understanding of how we can freshen up on our God Talk.

First, we need to discuss the fact that **we are chosen!** According to the Roman legal concept of adoption; an adopted child has a whole new identity, status, and set of relationships. Such a child is chosen to become part of a new family. "Because the Spirit makes us God's adopted children," writes a professor

of biblical studies named Richard Carlson, “we are empowered to address God in intimate and direct parental terms: Abba, Father, Pappa.” If someone asks you about your conception of God, you can simply reply: “God is like a parent, a mom or dad, who’s adopted me — who quite specifically has chosen me.” Once again, there is no need for us to use mystifying religious jargon: God has an intimate and direct parent-child relationship with us.

Second, we should never forget that like any good parent we can **always talk to God!** Because of our close kinship with Him we can approach God with any concerns that we have at any time, just as a child can do with a loving parent that cares about them. When we come to God in this manner, according to Paul, “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Spirit of God makes it **possible** for us to experience a new identity, a new status, and a new set of relationships as members of God’s family.

In a world of so many dysfunctional families, the family of God is always going to be an attractive topic of discussion. In our family of faith, in the body of Christ, God shows us unconditional love and unlimited grace. Our value comes from who we are, not from what we do. There is truly nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make God love us any less. In God’s family, the Spirit bears witness “with our spirit that we are children of God.”

The final thing that can help us with our God talk is for us to know and believe that through our baptisms *we have become heirs* — “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” This means that we will be “fully conformed to the glorious image of God that now exists in God’s Son, Jesus Christ,” says Professor Carlson. In other words, we will find ourselves side-by-side with our joint heir Jesus, the one who is “the firstborn within a large family.”

Being an heir feels good, doesn’t it? Especially when we consider that this usually means we will be receiving some of kind of inheritance! But being a joint

heir with Jesus does not mean instant luxury and ease. We may need to suffer with Jesus “so that we may also be glorified with him,” says Paul. The life of a true Christian — including love, mutual affection, honor, and zeal, — is inevitably going to include real sacrifice and suffering. The Spirit often reminds us that Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow him.

Such God talk is challenging, but it can be spoken by any of us, especially when we remember that we are chosen; we can talk to God; and we are His heirs. In fact, we all know the value of love, honor, hope and hospitality, and if we fail to use and act on these words, then they will fall out of use. As he was writing his New York Times article Jonathan Merritt discovered that language about Christian virtues is, unfortunately, declining right along with God talk. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, humble words like “modesty” have fallen by 52 percent. Compassionate words like “kindness” have dropped by 56 percent. Words expressing “thankfulness” have declined by 49 percent. And when such words fall out of circulation, our entire culture suffers.

On this day of Pentecost, the church should begin to talk again. Not with religious jargon, but with clear words about what it means to be children of God who are led by the Spirit of God. Each of us has been adopted by our loving Father, “Our Abba”, and we have an opportunity to serve God right alongside our brother Jesus. When we speak of love, honor, hope and hospitality — and, better yet, when we back up our words with our actions —there can truly be no doubt that the world will most certainly get the message.