

**Sermon, May 24, 2026**  
**“Please Swear”**  
**The Day of Pentecost**  
**Delivered by Rev. John Balicki**  
**St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine**

It’s described as a "gut-wrenching feeling in the middle of your stomach which slowly rises to your chest". "And then suddenly, boom, the tic will appear. "It could be anything from a swear word to telling somebody they're beautiful. I don't know what it's going to be."

These are the words of John Davidson, the inspiration behind the recent film “I Swear”, which has made headlines around the world because it has brought to light the extreme challenges of living with Tourette’s Syndrome. But what is the everyday reality of living with this often unpredictable condition?

Davidson experiences motor twitches, such as jaw jerks, vocal tics and coprolalia - involuntarily using obscene or offensive language - which makes it difficult to be in public. Silence or needing to be quiet is "really, really difficult", he says. Jaw jerks, involuntarily language, having a hard time being silent? Welcome to Pentecost Sunday 2026.

What happened on that Sunday 50 days after the resurrection? Our text describes it as “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability”. A tongue rested on each of them. And what did that tongue say? The words were about God’s deeds of power and people who were from at least thirteen named nations with their multiplicity of languages all heard them and understood them. It was a scene clearly out of control. What would it have been like to be there?

Amy Frykholm describes it this way:

*The passage never tells us about the experience from the followers’ point of view. What was it like to have a flame on one’s head and start spouting another language? Did they feel empowered? Bewildered? Excited?*

*Instead the perspective shifts to the witnesses. As you might expect, the crowd’s interpretation of events varies from amazement to skepticism. Peter has the unenviable task of trying to explain to them what he himself probably does not yet fully understand.*

*He begins his interpretive task by emphasizing a common ancestor among those who are gathered: the prophet Joel. This is the promised outpouring of the Spirit, he says. When the Spirit rains down, "your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Young warriors will see visions and elders will have dreams" This will be done so that the people can be "made whole and set free". He points to the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of this reality.*

*We know, from reading the rest of Acts, that this moment of potential understanding and unification is quite temporary. The apostles are later imprisoned, beaten, and stoned as they try to bring this message to the world. We also know that they set out for remote destinations, sharing their message of interconnectedness and healing with a wider world. They no doubt discovered again and again that new contexts create new meanings and new understandings.*

But it was this Pentecostal moment that inspired the courage to carry out all the acts of discipleship that followed.

*Two millennia later, we know we cannot live in Pentecost. Even recovering the old meanings of these events is impossible. We might crave this kind of experience. We might even try to manufacture it or manipulate it. But a better question might be: how can we let Pentecost inform and transform our ordinary practice?*

I suggest we begin with a daily prayer for our tongues to be loosened. In our class studying the book, "Resurrecting Easter", there was an image from one of Ireland's magnificent high stone crosses, dated back to the ninth or tenth centuries. These crosses have extensive scenes from both the Old and New Testaments and one of these depicts Christ's body, head to the left, lying physically prone, swathed in a winding sheet, face uncovered. Atop his body, but not his face is a very thick tombstone. Above his uncovered face, a bird has its beak in Christ's mouth to represent the Holy Spirit breathing risen life into his body. This is an extraordinarily unique attempt to depict the actual moment of the Resurrection.

In the gospel we'll hear later, Jesus breathes on his disciples and says "Receive the Holy Spirit". All of us who have been baptized or confirmed have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let's go literal for a minute. Can we imagine the Holy Spirit breathing life into our own mouths? Imagine if we were in our beds and woke up one morning with a bird's beak in our mouth. Unless we were a bird lover or an ardent Franciscan, my guess is we would bolt upright and launch into our own bout of creative swearing.

Can we find our voices, find our words? Or, unlike those with Tourette's syndrome, are our filters on overdrive? In the epistle today, Paul reminds the Corinthians that each member of the body is given the gift of the Holy Spirit though the gifts are varied. Some of those have to do with speaking, the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues. Maybe these sound too far out of

reach for us, gifts reserved for only the greatest of saints. But that's not what Paul says, "We were all made to drink of one Spirit".

My prayer for today is that we will all find our voices and use them, that our tongues may be loosened. Do we need to speak more words of love to those we love? Do we need to speak words of correction to someone whose behavior we have too long tolerated? Do we need to speak words of forgiveness to someone whom we have harbored a grudge against for too long? Do we need to speak more words of compassion to those who are struggling right now? Do we need to speak up more against the injustices we are seeing in our nation and our world?

Do we need to say more, "I can"; "I will" when something needs doing in our family, community, church or world? Can we pray for the Holy Spirit to put the right words into our mouths? Words of truth but words always spoken in respect and kindness.

Like our baptismal promises we have been reciting all Easter Season, we can only do this when we say, "I will with God's help". John Davidson found the way to deal with his illness was to help others. He began to organize Tourette's weekends for children and their parents to help understand their condition. As a result of his tireless activism for the Tourette's community, Davidson was honored with an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) by Queen Elizabeth II. And yes, Davidson really did shout "F-ck the Queen," who took no offense, and understood that it was an involuntary tic.

Pray to the Holy Spirit to find the words we need to say and that we find the voice to say them.