

Pentecost Sermon – 23 May 2010

Brown Memorial Park Avenue PCUSA

By Rev. Emily Martin

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

⁵The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Today's New Testament reading comes from the book of Acts, chapter 2, verses 1-12. Listen now for the Word of God.

Acts 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come,
they were all together in one place.

²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound
like the rush of a violent wind,
and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,
and a tongue rested on each of them.

⁴**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in other languages,
as the Spirit gave them ability.** *(repeat verse 4 in other languages)*

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation
under heaven living in Jerusalem.

⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered,
because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked,
“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?

⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene,
and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

¹¹Cretans and Arabs—**in our own languages
we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.**
(repeat verse 11b in other languages)

¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another,
“What does this mean?”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. **Thanks be to God.**

A couple of weeks ago, when my fiancé Richard and I met with the pastor who's going to marry us, he began by showing us some cartoons about relationships. They're from a book entitled, "Why We'll Never Understand Each Other." Each one includes what one partner actually says and what the other one hears—usually something completely different.

For example, "What she said: Drive carefully, dear. What he heard: You're way too stupid to be trusted driving alone in bad weather!" Or, one that hit a little closer to home, "What he said: Honey, are you almost ready yet? What she heard: Life as we know it will cease to exist unless you can alter the space-time continuum."

Within a week, we were writing our own cartoons, based on our own real-live miscommunications. In fact, it seems as though the Holy Spirit has gifted me with a number of examples during the past couple of weeks of how easily and how often communication can break down.

We exaggerate to make a point, and feelings are hurt. We speak without thinking, or we keep silent and let the other person's false assumptions stand. We hear what others say through varied and complicated histories, and a seemingly innocuous question can trigger painful memories that we can't help but react to. Our own pain or anxiety alters our ability to see and hear the person right in front of us. And that's with the people who speak our language!

So I was curious about God's seemingly anxious reaction to our monolingual ancestors in Genesis 11.

The people, who at that point all speak one language, were commanded to be fruitful and multiply, fill the whole earth, perhaps the better to fulfill their duty as stewards or caretakers.

But maybe that seemed too scary or daunting a task, so they decide instead to build a city and a tower, to build themselves an identity and a reputation. They decide to stay safe and to stay put.

Since God was at no point invited into this decision, He decides to do a little investigating on his own, see what the children are up to. In dismay, God declares, "This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them."

God gave us way too much credit.

Perhaps in her Trinitarian state of loving mutual relationship, God just assumed that if people could speak the same language, they could work together effectively. And it was clear that their priorities were not to be in relationship with God, but to achieve security and build an identity on their own.

But I have a hard time believing that speaking the same language is all it takes. I have a hard time believing that all those people were going to agree on how high that tower should be, or who should be in charge and who should clean the streets, and what the laws should be and the consequences of breaking them... All God had to do was wait. The people would have scattered themselves.

But maybe it was bigger than just scattering the people, giving them a little nudge back toward filling the whole earth. According to the text, God felt like it was important to mix up the language a bit, create new languages. But maybe, rather than a punishment, it was a gift.

I'll admit, I'm one of those Americans that, sadly, speaks only English fluently. But the languages I have encountered, however briefly, like Greek and Hebrew...have fascinated me.

They seem to carry within them whole worlds...history, theology, cultural memory...and each has its gems, its unique way of understanding and describing the world.

For example, one word, Ruah, in Hebrew means wind, breath, and Spirit—which is in my opinion does a much better job of describing the Holy Spirit than English.

In Greek, the same word that means righteousness also means justice; the two are inseparable in that language, just as they are, I believe, in God's intention.

Some people talk about the story of Pentecost as a reversal of the story of Babel. But God does not turn all the devout immigrant Jews into speakers of one language... God affirms the diversity of language, and empowers the disciples, at least this once to speak to people in the language that feels like home to them. Not the language of the empire—which most of them could probably understand. The language of their native lands.

What does it mean they ask? What does it mean? we ask every Pentecost. What does it mean that the first thing that the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' followers to do is to speak about God's mighty deeds in other languages.

It's as if God is reminding us that he is too big for any one language. Maybe that's why she gave us so many in the first place. Maybe our only chance to get it right, is to all be saying it a little bit differently.

What Pentecost reminds me is that the gospel message will always be one of translation. And translation is risky business.

It requires a full knowledge of the language and culture of the one to whom you are speaking. It requires that the translator continually check her assumptions and ask herself—when I say this, what will that person actually hear?

To be an effective translator, you have to first take a listening posture. You have to learn more than the language, you have to study the terrain, learn the history, the theology, the cultural assumptions that the other is making. You have to know your own history and theology, your own assumptions, and where those might affect your translation. And sometimes, you have to be willing to use language in a new way.

Maybe Pentecost is the Tower of Babel all over again. The message is clear—the followers of Jesus are not going to be staying safe or staying put. They are going to be scattered abroad throughout all the world. The name they will make for themselves will have everything to do with the name they proclaim.

God gives them a jump to boost their confidence and get them started. The first time, they are given the native tongues of their listeners as a gift. After that, though, the hard work of listening, relating, proclaiming, and translating cannot be avoided. We are a sent people. No doubt about it.

The past few weeks, I've been immersing myself in what at times can seem like a foreign culture. I've been doing AIDS volunteer training through Hope Springs, a non-profit started by Central Presbyterian Church and Grace Fellowship Church, two much larger much more conservative churches than ours. The AIDS part is familiar to me, but the evangelical Christian part takes some effort. We don't always make the same assumptions about God or the world, we rely on different stock phrases and rituals, we pray differently.

Last week, a young adult in our group shared with us the very painful story of how she learned of her HIV status. The biology professor leading the discussion suggested that we take a moment to pray. Instantly, without a word, the whole group gathered around this young woman and laid hands on her.

One by one we began to stammer out our prayers. In some ways it was a cacophony of different perspectives and theologies, but the message came through nonetheless—God loves you, you can trust Him to carry you through this, God has a purpose for your life, and you are not alone. That message came through loud and clear from voices that were black, white, Asian, young, old, HIV+, conservative, liberal... I heard it, and I think everyone else did too.

For me, it was a reminder that the Holy Spirit is still alive and well, breaking down barriers, opening hearts, and translating our halting proclamation into a powerful witness of God's love. And it was a reminder not to get stuck in the literal miracle of Pentecost.

Maybe sometimes Pentecost does look like our sister Lydia from El Salvador being welcomed to worship in her native tongue. But maybe it also looks like new young adult members connecting with eighteen fifth through eighth graders through a rousing game of toilet tag. Maybe it looks like a neighborhood walk with Build. Maybe it looks like a class at the Institute for Christian and Jewish studies. Maybe it looks like two people from very different backgrounds getting to know each other better over coffee.

Whatever your native tongue—Spanish, Southern, medicine, privilege, feminist, Star Wars, the street... Pentecost means that staying safe and staying put are not an option for God's people.

Pentecost means the gospel of Jesus Christ is best proclaimed in translation—perhaps because it requires both humility and relationship. Relationship with one another, and relationship with God, who after all was the first one to do this whole translating thing.

God translated God's Word, God's love for us, first into stars that puncture the darkness, and dogs who never hold a grudge, and fruit so ripe and sweet, you could eat it for dessert. And when we didn't understand, God translated it into language we could speak, "I will be your God," she said, "and you will be my people." And when we still did not understand, the prophets set up a language lab to help us. And when we still didn't get it, God's Word took on flesh. Christ was born, both the translator and the translation.

Christ embodied that spirit of humility, of listening, of love, so crucial to translation. Christ immersed himself in our humanity, so that we might understand God's love for us—that we might hear it in our own native tongues. We do the hard work of translating God's mighty deeds, and God's mighty love, knowing that Christ goes before us, setting the example. And we do it, knowing that the Spirit has our back.

The Spirit continues to show up, opening doors of communication and relationship where none existed previously. The Spirit opens hearts, including our own, and give us new words, new images, new examples of God's power and love for us, so that our proclamation might always be fresh, that our witness might always be authentic.

The Spirit empowers us to go to the margins of our comfort zones again and again, proclaiming the gospel of the one who loved us so much that he immersed himself in our culture, learned our language, listened to the whole ugly, beautiful, messy, truth about our lives, and showed us how to love without borders. I think that's a story worth translating into every language.