

Many Languages, One God  
Acts 2: 1-18  
Pentecost  
June 9, 2019  
Rev. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

Rushing wind, tongues of fire.... Pentecost is without a doubt a dramatic event. I guess when you think about it, each of the “big three” celebrations at the heart of the Christian church are pretty dramatic: a virgin birth of a savior in a cow stall, a resurrected dead man and now, this. You can’t say that Christianity lacks for great highlights; but the truth is that little attention has been paid over the centuries to Pentecost in Protestant, particularly Baptist, churches. I suspect it has something to do with the struggle in trying to replicate this event: we can dress up kids as Mary and Joseph and place a baby doll in a manger. We can worship at dawn or act out surprise at the empty tomb. But without pyrotechnics and wind tunnels, it’s difficult to get the effect of Pentecost on an otherwise ordinary Sunday morning.

Which is why I don’t want to focus on those things this morning but rather I want us to direct our attention to this specific demonstration of multi-linguality. How many of you consider yourself fluent in more than one language? Now I’m not referring to those of us who have a few words in various languages because we’ve done some traveling or fulfilled a language requirement in high school or college. How many of us can actually converse, do business and live using another language? Anyone?! And how many of us have been in a place or had an experience where we did *not* speak the language? How did that make you feel?

Being in place where you do not know the language can be an exciting and motivating experience but as often as not it results in frustration, fear and vulnerability. Not being able to

ask for what you need, to advocate on your own behalf, to know what's going on and to engage fully is a disempowering experience.

My daughter and I spent Memorial Day weekend in Ottawa, Canada. Canada has two national languages: English and French. When we were on the Ontario side of the river, everything was in English first and then French; when we were on the Quebec side of the river everything was in French first and then English. Last week I got a pedicure: the women working in the salon were bi-lingual. They spoke Vietnamese to each other and English to the customers. In line at Marshall's the other day, the women behind me were at least bi-lingual. They spoke Spanish to each other and English to the clerk. Now while none of those experiences felt in any way threatening, I was reminded of my limitations and highlighted for me the important of language.

The Holy Spirit is given at Pentecost to enliven the early believers to embody the powerful love and mercy of God! What's fascinating here is not *just* the wind and fire, but the whole importance placed on language. As God's Spirit is poured out on all who had gathered, people hear others speaking about God *in their own language!* It had a life-altering effect!

Now we need to remember that in Jesus' day, most people spoke several languages; they needed to in order to navigate the business of everyday living. "Latin was the official language of the Empire; however, most of Roman daily affairs were likely conducted in Greek. Likewise, Hebrew was the religious language of the Jewish religion, but many of the Jews in Israel at that time conversed in Aramaic. Of course, in Jerusalem itself, as a cultural center, there were multiple other languages from the reaches of the empire and beyond as well. Not every resident or visitor of Jerusalem would have been expected to know all of these languages, but it is likely that most were conversant in at least a couple." (<https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-language-acts-21-21-amy-allen/>) What is miraculous here isn't the *speaking* in multiple

languages, but rather the *hearing!* The Spirit comes in such a way that we can begin to grasp the complexity and diversity of God! God doesn't insist that people speak *God's* language but rather *each one* can hear and understand the Good News in their very *own* language. This transformative moment comes as people, for the first time, hear God's voice in a voice that echoed theirs, in a language they were familiar with, in all its nuances. And when we hear and understand someone who speaks *to us* and *like us*, we feel included, valued and empowered. When we are someplace "strange", that is, outside of our own particular comfort zone or culture, and we hear someone speaking in our *own* language, we experience validation, engagement, comfort and inclusivity. It is confidence-boosting, empowering. We can all be full participants when we can hear and speak to one another.

And it is *only* when we can do that that we can be true partners, fully inclusive and welcoming of one another in the household of God. I am not suggesting that we can master all the languages of the world, but we can be open to learning, we can be sensitive to the fact that our language (English) is not the only language God speaks. In order to do this, we have to be intentional; we have to take risks. We have to cross boundaries (real and imagined), and be willing to make ourselves vulnerable, open, teachable. Humor and humility help.

Several years ago, I was in El Salvador with a group from Central Baptist Church in Wayne and my colleague was in need of a restroom. Discretely, he moved to the edge of the room and whispered in someone's ear, "Como es su bano?" The person gave him a strange smile and said, "Bien" (good) and turned away. Uncertain as to why he got that response he tried again....and again. Until finally he said it to someone who was bilingual. Putting an arm around my friend the individual said quietly, "You have been asking people "*how* is your bathroom"? I think you meant to ask "where". Come, I will show you."

Language matters! Last summer I lived in Italy for five weeks and my crash course in the language afforded me little more than the basics niceties. It certainly didn't help me order the 40 sandwiches I needed prepared ahead at a bakery where none of us could understand the other! Translators and translation tools, like "Google translate", help. But nothing replaces knowing another's reality and being able to genuinely connect. Goggle Translate doesn't do me much good when I find myself struggling with the nuances of "street language" right here in Philadelphia; language conveys culture as well. We have to be intentional, as God was intentional. We have to make an effort, as God makes an effort. We *can* stretch our hearts and our minds with the gift of God's Holy Spirit who makes a point of moving beyond the one to the many, beyond the inside to the world.

And then notice what happens—when they began to speak in the languages of the peoples gathered, those who had been touched by the Spirit moved outdoors, like we did last week. The place where they had gathered could no longer contain them. In reflecting on this reality one author noted, "If we take this as a metaphor for today's church, we can't help but see the beauty of it. The spirit gives the gathered community the courage and gifts to be the scattered community. Yes, spirit comes, quite dramatically, to those who are praying and waiting. But just as dramatically, they are drawn to the street. The church is given the ability to speak in ways in which people can understand. Do we have good news to share? Absolutely. Is there also good news to be heard in the street? Definitely. "

"We move to the other side of our stained glass and engage, because we come to recognize that the spirit is already and also active there. We have much to give and much to learn if we don't stay indoors. We begin to have the vision and understanding to see tongues of fire resting

on all the people we pass. We see them as sisters and brothers, as friends and family.”

[\(https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2016/05/11/indoorsoutdoors/\)](https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2016/05/11/indoorsoutdoors/)

**This** is the miracle of Pentecost. But it doesn't stop here. “Throughout the rest of Acts, the apostles engage in proclamation and mission that *goes out* to people of all nations, that *accommodates* different diets and cultural practices, not demanding that converts come to them, but rather, bringing the good news of Jesus to meet everyone *where they are*. ”

[\(https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-language-acts-21-21-amy-allen/\)](https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-language-acts-21-21-amy-allen/).

Their call is our call too. Pentecost, in all its drama, isn't just a wild remembrance of the past but a call to new relationship in the future, *our* future. We might not have wind and flames, but we *can* pray that even as our hearts are transformed by hearing and understanding God's invitation to us, we can be instruments of sharing that same good news, and *receiving it*, with and from others. Diversity is God's gift; it is meant to strengthen us and empower us and unite us.

Let us celebrate Pentecost as the gift of God to *everyone*; let us dare to move out into our community to meet God who is *already* there. Let us endeavor to hear and speak the language of one another, if nothing else, then inclusive language of God's love.

s

