

June 4, 2017

Acts 2: 1-21
Pentecost

Speaking Each Other's Language

In June of 1963, President John F. Kennedy traveled to West Berlin, Germany. What would he say? How would he communicate to these Germans the support of the U.S. just 22 months after soviet supported East Germany erected the Berlin Wall? What would he SAY to these people that feared a possible East German occupation? He began his speech with this sentence:

Ich bin ein Berliner I am a Berliner..



The crowd went crazy. He didn't come with American imperialism. He didn't talk down to them. Even if only for a couple of phrases, He SPOKE THEIR LANGUAGE... and they were able to hear!

That Pentecost Sunday in Jerusalem, they couldn't have been more different... yes they were all Jewish, but culturally, dream language, spoken language, looks; all different.

I'm sure when they came to Jerusalem, they stayed within their groups (their tribes), to speak and be heard and understood.. they traveled together.. once home they reminisced.

And on this day... they were there for the Temple observances of Pentecost (the giving of the Law). And they heard something different: ordinary Israelites speaking their language about God, and about who Jesus was. Out of the mouths of strangers, came their own language to tell them something important.



They couldn't have heard *this* message any other way. For somehow, these backwater disciples were simultaneously speaking many different languages at once so that disparate people could **hear in their own language** a new message about how God had come to them.

We always say that Pentecost is a multi-ethnic day; lots of different languages speaking all at once. I imagine many of us have participated in Pentecost worship services where the scripture is read in different languages, or different languages all at once. But that can be just babble if it's not YOUR language; a nice addition to the worship service. Something that entertains, but not necessarily informs. How do we relate to people different from ourselves?

Listen as one seminarian describes a desperate situation:

When I was a seminary student, I worked as a chaplain at a large public hospital in Dallas, Texas. Many of the people who came into the hospital were Hispanic, and so, as a part of my orientation, I was given a set of index cards with simple Spanish phrases and prayers. One day, not long after I had begun this position, I was called to the room of a frantic elderly woman. The nurses were trying to calm her down, but she was clearly agitated and angry, chiding them in Spanish.

“What can you do, Chaplain?” they asked.

I was twenty-one years old. I knew only the Spanish that was written on my little index card. And I knew even less about how to calm down frantic patients in a hospital. So I did the only thing I could think to do—I pulled out my index card and began to read: “*Padre nuestro...*” The Lord’s prayer.

I’m sure my pronunciation was horrible. But the woman stopped. She smiled softly at me, bowed her head, and whispering, joined in the prayer as I continued. Somewhere, across whatever chaos and division was between her and I, she had felt seen. Acknowledged. And so she was able to hear the calming words of her God anew. (*The Rev. Amy Allen*)

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In years past, this Acts 2 Pentecost passage was paired with the Genesis (11:1-9) passage about the **Tower of Babel**. You remember that story? Where humans who spoke but one language decided they could take this God business into their own hands. In fact they were going to build the hugest sky scraper imaginable so they themselves could reach God and be as great as God. As the story goes, God looked down, and not only smashed the tower, but struck them all with different languages, so they couldn’t understand each other. And if they couldn’t understand each other, how would they **work together** on such a project? Imagine these thousands of people trying to communicate suddenly in foreign words. It was babble. It was bedlam. They all scattered and that was the end of the Tower of Babel.



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This Acts 2 story of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost has always fascinated me because I don’t see it as a story about **speaking**, so much as it is **speaking someone else’s language...** speaking so someone else can understand what you are trying to say. And you can’t **speak** someone else’s language without **understanding** their language... HOW they speak, and WHO they are.

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My Swedish grandfather left Sweden at the beginning of the 20th century. They, as all the peasants, were so poor in Sweden they no hope of bettering themselves. The army was eager to conscript the men into the military.

Like so many, my grandfather and his sister were so desperate they took a chance on sailing to America in cattle car conditions. My great aunt left first. My grandfather left next. He spoke no English.

When he got to Boston, his sister was not there to meet him. Imagine a teeming city and no idea of what to do next. Someone came up to him and spoke Swedish to him. It was like a letter from home. After talking a while and he telling his story, his new best friend suggested they go get a drink at a local bar where he slipped my grandfather a mickey, which rendered him just able to walk but not to protest. The next thing my grandfather knew was that he was aboard a merchant ship, where he was in forced labor for the next two years before he jumped ship to escape.

The power of someone speaking your own language.

This last week, two days before the Harvard graduation ceremonies for all the students, there was another graduating celebration: It was Harvard's **first commencement for black graduate students** (including the prestigious law, divinity, business, government, and medical schools), where many of the speakers talked about a different, more personal kind of struggle, the struggle to be black at Harvard. The graduates formed a procession to organ music, received kente-cloth stoles, listened to a classmate play Bach on cello, and sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing."



And only a few hours after the new "Harvard University Black Commencement," some 120 "Latinx" students attended their third annual "Latinx" commencement in the basement of a science building where Latin music played, and graduates received stoles with "Clase Del 2017!"

And the **University of Delaware** joined many colleges with "**Lavender**" graduations for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

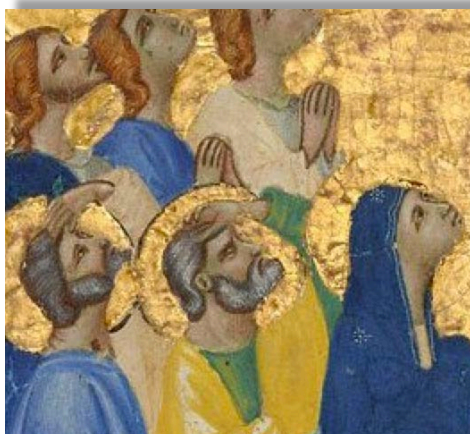


At **Columbia University**, students who were the first college graduates in their families attended a first-ever “**First-Generation Graduation**,” with inspirational speeches, a procession and the awarding the **torch** pins. (**Colleges Celebrate Diversity With Separate Commencements - The New York Times.pdf**)

The power of someone speaking your own language, so you can hear.

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Pentecost. Seven weeks after Easter each year, Christians celebrate Pentecost, one of the three major Christian festivals (along with Christmas and Easter). Its roots are Jewish, for Pentecost was (and still is) a Jewish festival. Occurring 50 days after Passover and linked to both Israel's agricultural cycle and her religious history, it celebrated the completion of the spring harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.



For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Spirit upon the followers of Jesus (after his ascension into heaven). This account was written near the end of the first century by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The story is filled with richly symbolic language drawn from the Jewish tradition. As the author tells the story, the Spirit came upon the community with the sound of a "rushing wind." and with "tongues of fire" resting on each of them. In the Hebrew Bible, "wind" and "fire" are both associated with God's presence. This story is not so much about the **birth of the church**, as it

is about believers gifted to share the Good News throughout the world, regardless of barriers.

And yet still today in and out of the church, **language** (even when we outwardly speak the same words), can divide us sharply because of **how** we speak, and the world view behind our words:

I still marvel at the miracle of **FaceBook**. With a few keystrokes, I can literally **see** how divided liberals and conservatives are from each other **because of** language, which presents one world view as foreign to the other.



We face a crisis in the United Methodist Church now because two major groups do not

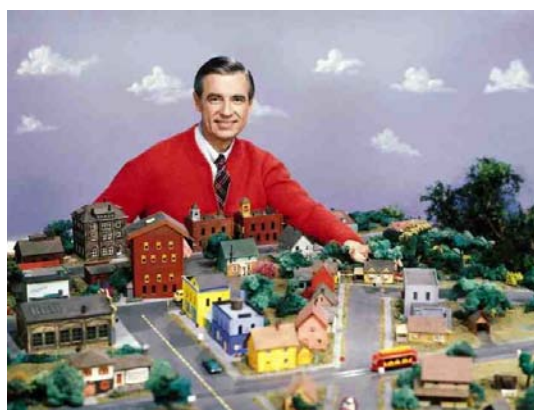
speak the same language about human sexuality and **how** we understand the Bible. We are not able to speak the others' language to promote mutual understanding.

Even in **this church**, we speak different languages. Many of you participated in the **Worship and Music survey**. Such different languages as we speak:

I love the old hymns.	v.	I love the Faith We Sing .
I want worship informality.		I want the tradition.
I love the organ.		I hate the organ.
I love the worship screen.		I hate having a screen in worship.

How do we hope to speak each other's language?

Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was a place many of us learned about what "being a neighbor" was all about. Here are some lessons learned from one United Methodist pastor:



1. Many different people, with various backgrounds and understandings of God, are living in one big neighborhood.
2. It's a challenge for our neighborhood to be a community. We like to be with people who look, talk, and act like us. It's hard to cross the street to be friends with others who might be different.
3. Our neighborhood is defined by the stories we tell each other.
4. We tell our own stories in our own languages. We want to be heard, respected, and taken seriously. Use kind and gentle words.
5. Even when we don't realize it, God helps us tell our stories. God gives us words to say and songs to sing when it's hard to communicate with those around us. In this way, our story becomes God's story. God's story becomes our story.
6. Listening to others is part of being a good neighbor. When we hear God's words in different places from unexpected people, we become more aware of God's presence.
7. God isn't something you can count or contain. God simply is. Open your windows and let God breathe into the world around you. **You can let God loose in the neighborhood!**

(Richard Lowell Bryant, **How Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood Informs My Pentecost Journey –United Methodist Insight.pdf**)

So, how do we undo the Tower of Babel?

How do we make inroads of understanding when we face such huge walls of misunderstanding each other in politics, our denomination, and even in our own church?

I Cor. 12:7 tells us on this Pentecost Sunday:

The Spirit is given to enable individual believers to look beyond their individual needs, hopes, or fears and equip them with distinct gifts, all in order to work together for the "common good."

On this Pentecost Sunday, with all the richness and color and tradition, can we begin to understand the Holy Spirit **not** as a rescuing super hero, but as God's Gift of Presence that gives us the tools and courage, and encouragement and *stick-to-it-iveness* to help us reach out and understand and embrace each other, rather than build walls to separate us.

Rather than we hoping that God will take away our challenging or difficult situations, can we see that God often comes along side of us with the Spirit to equip and strengthen us to wade into these difficult and challenging waters? And perhaps God actually may be working **through us** for the common good.



Will Pentecost become a lifestyle for us .. a mindset? Or will it just another occasion, a celebration, a color, a quaint Bible story?

The miracle of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit *comes*, so we might speak each other's language, to hear, to understand, and to live into God's Good News as a community in Christ..

Veni Spiritus. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Amen.

Preached by the Rev. Pamela Nelson-Munson at Eugene's First United Methodist Church.