

Speaking God's Language  
Acts 2:1-12  
May 31, 2020  
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George Bernard Shaw once said that England and America are two countries separated by a common language. I can attest to that. In my last congregation we had a wonderful family from Great Britain. They were really neat people, but we sometimes had trouble communicating. Tony would say to me, "I've just come from garage and ran into a bobby on the lift as I was heading up to my flat to visit the loo." And I would say, "You're in America now, Tony, speak English!"

England and America aren't the only groups separated by language today. Within our own country, different sectors of the population use the different words to say the same things. Is it a Coke or pop or a soda? Is it a sub or a hero or a hoagie? Or, more seriously, do Black America and White America speak differently? Do Liberal America and Conservative America use the same words to mean different things? Do Christians across the country, supposedly united as the body of Christ, have wildly different vocabularies? We are a nation divided by many things, including a common language.

Language plays a prominent part in our scripture reading this morning. In Acts, on the day of Pentecost, we learn that the disciples are all gathered in one place. Hold that thought. Because Pentecost was a major Jewish festival, Jews from all over the Roman Empire would have been gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate. What you need to know is that most of them were polyglots, meaning they spoke more than one language. They probably would have spoken Greek, the language of the Roman Empire; they would have spoken Hebrew, the language of their religion; and they would have spoken the local dialect, like Egyptian or Phrygian or Cappadocian.

So the linguistic miracle of Pentecost is that when the disciples start their inspired speaking, the people in the crowd hear what they are saying in their own dialect. It's as if the Holy Spirit is serving as an interpreter for each listener, translating the spirited speech of the disciples into Egyptian and Phrygian and Cappadocian. In a sense, God was uniting this diverse crowd through the power of speech. God was speaking their language.

To understand the significance of God's uniting people through language on Pentecost, you have to first understand how God used language to drive people apart. I believe Pentecost makes much more sense in light of Genesis 11 and the story of the tower of Babel, so let me read that to you now. (Read Genesis 11)

For many years now I've had a fascination with mountains. I was blessed to spend some time at basecamp of Denali a few years ago and it was life-changing. Now, I have absolutely no desire to climb a mountain. You could put a year's supply of BBQ at the top and I won't budge. But I'm captivated by people who do, who push their bodies to the limit in order to stand on top of the world, to be at the closest point between heaven and earth.

That is part of what motivated the builders of the tower of Babel to do what they did, and what got them in trouble. This story takes place shortly after Noah, when God got fed up with disobeying, greedy, power-hungry people and decided to wipe the earth clean and start fresh. Noah and his family obeyed the command to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with offspring who would have shared a common language. But there's one major problem: all the people were still disobeying, greedy, power-hungry humans. The flood didn't wash away their

sinfulness, and it was only a matter of time before they exhibited the same destructive behaviors as before.

After the people settle in Shinar, they looked around at their neighbors and saw that all of them had big towers that reach high into the sky. And in their desperate desire to keep up with the Jonesites, they decided they needed one, too. So the property committee put together plans and conducted a capital campaign to pay for the bricks and the tar, and they began building a city with a tower that reached to the heavens. Why? Because, scripture tells us, they wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted other nations to look at them and say, “Oooh, those must be the Israelites, the ones who built that really cool tower!” Why is that a problem? Because when you’re so focused on making a name for yourself, there’s not much room left for God.

The tower they were building was a ziggurat, which was a common structure for pagan religions. Now, the ziggurat itself wasn’t the temple; the temple would be built right next door. On the outside of the ziggurat was a stairway that led all the way to the top, where there would be a room with a small bed. The belief was that the local god would dwell in that little room at the top, and would descend the stairway when folks were worshipping in the temple next door. Time for worship, ring the bells, down comes the god, “Blessings, blessings, blessings,” worship is over, the god climbs back to its little room.

Do you see why the Israelite God wasn’t too keen on the building of this tower? You can’t put our God in a box, not even at the top of a mighty tower. If the people could build a tower like this, then they would think nothing was impossible. So God intervenes. God took away the one common bond they had, the one thing essential to their sense of community: their common language. It’s hard enough to build something together if you DO speak the same language! Imagine all the finger-wagging and hand-gesturing and general chaos that would ensue if you don’t speak the same language. So the place was called “Babel,” which means “confused.” No one spoke the same language, so they scattered.

Fast-forward several thousand years to Jerusalem, the day of Pentecost. God comes down, not using the steps of a ziggurat, but using tongues of flame borne of the Holy Spirit. It’s appropriate that it was tongues, because when they are touched the disciples start to speak. But they’re not babbling. No, they begin to proclaim the Good News and the Holy Spirit translates it into Egyptian and Phrygian and Cappadocian for the listeners. You see? This is the tower of Babel reversed. It’s the bookend to the scattering. It’s the reunification of God’s people through language. Remember the first line? “They were all gathered in one place.” The bond of community was broken at the tower, but the Holy Spirit was the epoxy that fastened those believers back together and united them to follow in Christ’s footsteps. Once they started speaking the same language again, they finally DID build something together: the church.

But Pentecost was about more than restoring language; it essentially accomplished what the builders of the tower of Babel couldn’t. Remember, they were trying to make a name for themselves, trying to reach up high enough to be equal to God. What Pentecost reminds us is that we don’t have to worry about getting to God’s level, because God came down to ours, not using the steps of a ziggurat, but using the beams of a wooden cross. Christ’s Spirit dwells within us, around us, calling us forward to speak God’s language. Instead of trying to build a tower out of bricks and tar, we’re called to be the living stones that build Christ’s church.

Now, fast forward again to the present day. The church has grown, the word of God has spread around the globe, the Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages, the Spirit is still hard at work amongst believers. So why are we still babbling? Christians can’t communicate WITH EACH OTHER, much less people different than us. Even though we share a common

spiritual language, we still have difficulty communicating in a way that honors God and the God image inside each other. Christians fight so much I have to wonder, “Are we speaking the same language?” How do we know when our words are God’s words? How can we make sure we honor the spirit of Pentecost when we talk to each other?

I can tell you what I believe isn’t the language of God. “Hate” isn’t in God’s vocabulary. If a sentence begins with “God hates...” you can be pretty sure someone other than God is saying it. God’s language also doesn’t delineate between “us” and “them.” Our country is so divided politically and racially right now. God didn’t draw those lines. We did. And it’s up to us to start erasing them by talking to each other with words that honor God.

To speak God’s language, first we have to know God’s language. It’s not that difficult to learn; in fact, you probably know most of the words. I’m not talking about words like “predestination” or “eschatological” or “transubstantiation.” If you know what those mean, you probably have either been to seminary or have way too much time on your hands. No, I’m talking about words like “Thank you” and “How can I help?” and “You’re welcome here” and “I’m sorry.” That’s the language of faith that unites us together as believers. When we speak those words, we are allowing God’s Spirit to work through us to connect with another person.

There is so much that seeks to divide us in this world. We have tried to make a name for ourselves and our souls have been scattered. On this day, the day of Pentecost, we can begin the process of coming back together, of being all in one place, of listening the words God wants us to hear, words like “grace” and “welcome” and “blessing.” And then, we can go and speak those words into a selfish, scattered world. We can say to one another, “I’m sorry” and “You’re forgiven” and “How can I help?” I wonder how this world would be different if people stopped trying to speak for God and instead trying to speak the language God has given us. We have the words. We have the call. What are we missing? Come, Holy Spirit, come.