

## **“LOST IN TRANSLATION”**

**Readings: Genesis 11:1-9**

**Acts 2:1-21**

TODAY’S SCRIPTURE READING from Acts, in which the people accuse the disciples of being drunk, reminds me of the story about an Episcopal priest and his Baptist counterpart. The Baptist minister said to his Episcopal colleague, “I find your habit of having an evening cocktail reprehensible. In fact, I think I would rather commit adultery than take a drink.” To which the priest replied, so would I but I didn’t know we had a choice.”

The disciples didn’t have any choice either on the first Pentecost. They weren’t “filled with new wine” as their detractors suggested; rather they were on fire with the Holy Spirit, which on that particular occasion gave them the power to speak in a multiplicity of languages. It was Peter, who finally set the crowd straight when he said,

“People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem,  
let this be known to you, and listen to what I  
I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose,  
for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No,  
this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:  
‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I  
will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your  
sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and

your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

In many ways of course, the story of Pentecost stands as a corrective to this morning's Old Testament lesson from Genesis. There we find just the opposite from what we read in the Book of Acts. In an effort to thwart humanities attempt to build a tower stretching into the heavens, God introduces a variety of different languages in order to confuse rather than unify the people. In that story a common language is perceived as a bad thing, while in the story of Pentecost it is perceived as a good thing.

Good or bad language is always a challenge. Having recently returned from Korea I can assure you communication between people who speak a different language can be both comical and trying. Nor does it always have to be a different language that makes communication difficult. Remember George Bernard Shaw's famous definition of England and the United States as "two countries separated by a common language?" I'll never forget the time after college when I was hitch-hiking across Scotland and snagged a ride with lorry driver on his way from Edinburgh to London. He had such a heavy brogue I

couldn't understand a word he said. I just sat there and kept nodding my head "yes" the whole way.

People sometimes ask me what the greatest challenge at First Church is. Believe it or not, it's not finances. Nor is it recruiting volunteers. Rather it's communication. Getting the word out, keeping people informed, and making sure that everyone is reading off the same page is the biggest problem we have here. Technical advancements like cell phones and e-mail have helped, but when push comes to shove keeping the congregation engaged and informed still remains our most difficult challenge.

Remember that line the prison warden kept repeating in the movie, "Cool Hand Luke?" "What we got here is failure to communicate." In many ways isn't that what the world has too—a failure to communicate?

How many times for example, have the Israelis and Palestinians announced a new peace proposal? How many times have they begun to meet together only to have the talks break down amidst an outburst of new violence? You know they both want peace but they mean different things by it. To the Palestinians peace means autonomy but to the Israeli's it means security. Somehow you get the feeling that they just keep talking past each other.

The most common problem couples have who come in to see me for marriage counseling doesn't have anything to do with financial matters or sexual intimacy. On the contrary, it has to do with communication. One partner or the other has the feeling that he or she just isn't being heard--that the other person in the relationship isn't listening.

The amazing thing about Pentecost is that for one, brief, shining moment, everyone was on the same page. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Rome, both Jews and Proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—each heard in their own language about the wonderful, mighty acts of God. The reason why they could all hear the same thing wasn't because they suddenly started using *Rosetta Stone*. No, it was because they had opened their hearts to receive the Holy Spirit.

Every time I hear the Pentecost story I'm transported back to sixth grade when our class took a field trip to the United Nation's building in New York. Two things are forever etched in my mind about that trip. The first is the statue in the lobby of a man pounding his sword on an anvil. Because I was biblically illiterate at the time it wasn't until much later that I discovered the statue was really a depiction of Isaiah chapter two, verse four, "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

But the second thing I remember is that when we went into the building and sat down there were these headphones you could put on and depending upon the setting you could listen to the speaker in English, Russian, French, Spanish, German or Chinese.

In a way, that's what Pentecost was like only the person they were dialing in wasn't a translator, but rather the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Tower of Babel where God used the Spirit as a force to confound humanity, at Pentecost God used the Holy Spirit as a force to unify humanity.

Despite all the evil he did, I have to admit Hitler had at least two good ideas. The first was the Volkswagen (an affordable car for the common people) and the second was Esperanto (an international language common to all people). The Roman Catholic Church also championed the idea of a language common to all people, but instead of Esperanto they used Latin. The idea was to be able to go anywhere in the world and hear the mass celebrated the same way in the same language. Not a bad idea, as I came to realize after I sat through one incomprehensible service after another in Korea earlier this month!

Today English is the new Latin, not because it represents the language of the church, but because it represents the language of international business. Convenient as that may be for people like us, you have to wonder if it's really a good thing if everyone ends up speaking the same language. Many Native Americans, for example, fear losing their language. To lose your language is to lose more than words—it's also to lose your culture, heritage, and identity too.

People here are worried about English not being spoken by everyone, but I've been to Switzerland where, depending upon which part of the country you're in, they speak Swiss, German, or French. Despite a variety of languages I would say the Swiss have managed to do quite well for themselves, thank you. Our neighbors to the north, the Canadians, communicate in both French and English, but being bilingual hasn't ruined their country or diminished their sense of national identity.

The study of neurolinguistics, however, reminds us that we communicate with more than just words. We have other ways of conveying our thoughts and feelings besides verbal language. Faces, hand gestures, and body movements all convey a message whether we are conscious of it or not. I'm always amazed when I meet someone whose language I do not speak how much we are able to communicate anyway. If you like someone you have a way of conveying that whether you use words or not. If you are sad, happy, or tired we seem to have a way of communicating that too.

In a way, maybe that's what today's scripture lesson from the Book of Acts really means. Maybe it doesn't mean that they all suddenly became multi-lingual or that they all started talking to one another in the same spoken language. Maybe it means that somehow, in ways both strange and mysterious, they all began to understand one another. Maybe for the first time they began to look at one another not as Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, but rather as human beings created in the image of God.

The church of Jesus Christ is indeed charged to speak a common language, but it's not the language of any one particular people, race, or nation. Rather, it is the universal language of faith, hope, and love, for that is the one language every person in the world understands and the one language every person in the world needs to hear.

The church usually loses its way when it tries to speak in a language other than its own. In recent times the church has tried to speak the language of psychology, the business, and politics. But when we do we tend to sound more like the Tower of Babel than the Church of Jesus Christ.

I think in a way this is what our Minister Emeritus, Van Parker was trying to tell us last week. Even in this complex and ever changing world in which we live, we have to keep speaking the language of faith, hope, and love because that is the only language the church really knows and it's the one language a hurting world most desperately needs to hear.

On this Pentecost Sunday, so bright with sunshine and so full of hope, let's open ourselves to the refreshing winds of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, let's redouble our efforts to speak to the world about the love of God and the mercy of Christ in a language that not only crystal clear, but also faith-filled and spirit-led.

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