

God's Languages
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"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Last Sunday, we were left with Jesus ascending into heaven (however we conceive of this concept) and the disciples returning to Jerusalem and heading to the Upper Room, to await the arrival of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit certainly arrives today, and what an entrance the Spirit makes—with winds, and tongues of fire, and gifts of speaking in diverse languages so that all of the people could actually understand what the disciples were saying!

Pentecost has always been one of my favorite days in the church year. I love this day because it marks the birth of the Church and it's full of energy, excitement, passion, mystery, and the Holy Spirit. It's one of those days that we in the UCC can point to, with our belief in our Still Speaking God and say, "This is what we're talking about!"

Look at the disciples seeing God, seeing one another, and seeing their neighbors in a new light. Look at the gifts of the Holy Spirit! Look at Peter standing tall and proud and facing the crowd and declaring the Good News for all to hear! Look at this new revelation that ushers in the church and shakes the very foundations of society back then and even now.

Pentecost is this amazing day for so many reasons. But like the Ascension because we may have trouble with the literal events of the day, part of each of us probably wants to ignore it or just brush it aside. I have to admit that when I hear modern-day Christians talking about speaking in tongues and the Spirit gifting them with this ability... and when they cite Pentecost over and over again to make their case, well, the cynical side of me thinks that speaking in tongues is crazy and I just frankly want nothing to do with it.

The point of Pentecost is not the disciples "speaking in tongues" as such or even the tongues of fire that apparently alighted on each one of them. Pentecost is this moment where the disciples can be witnesses to all the diverse populations in Jerusalem. The people gathered around the disciples were actually able to understand what they were saying. The language barriers, the ethnic and cultural barriers seem to have been broken! And the disciples were able to be witnesses; they were able to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In the story, the disciples actually weren't speaking in tongues the way modern day charismatic Christians do. Instead, the disciples were able to miraculously speak in these entirely different vernacular languages of the people present in Jerusalem. This is amazing considering that most of the disciples were from Galilee and their own native language was Aramaic.

It would be like the Holy Spirit gifting us with this ability today and all of a sudden in this sanctuary we were able to speak Chinese, German, Spanish, Swahili, Arabic, and any other language you can think of even though most of us are used to English as our first language and most of us have been born in the U.S. And then we could go out into Lexington and the surrounding communities and speak to people about Christianity and we could do so in languages and terms that they would understand. We wouldn't just be babbling and incomprehensible, we would be gifted with speaking languages that perhaps we have never studied and don't really know.

That's the whole point of the story! For the first time, the disciples are able to be witnesses "in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" because they actually have the Spirit-gifted ability to speak the languages of these native peoples. This is why people in the crowds are astonished and asking one another, "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

The point of the story is the disciples being able to speak to people from all over the place. The point of the story is the disciples meeting people on their own terms, wherever they are. In this case, by speaking in the native languages of the people in those gathered crowds.

And actually, when we think of the history of Christian mission, we may think about Western imperialism and Christians forcing native peoples all over the world to learn the English language, to read the Bible in English, to say the Lord's Prayer in English or Spanish or French or Portuguese or whatever the native language of particular missionaries ended up being. And this was often unfortunately the case, but not always.

The most successful missionaries tended to somehow adapt to the cultures in which they were living or even take it a step further and help improve the lives of those they were trying to convert. We have the story of Cyril and Methodius who were brothers who traveled from Constantinople to the modern-day nations of Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic in the 800s. While in these areas, the brothers actually put spoken Slavic languages in written form for the first time and invented an alphabet from which the Cyrillic alphabet was derived.

Basically, these brothers, who actually became St. Cyril and St. Methodius, were able to help teach Christianity to the people by doing so in the peoples' own language. Whenever you see images of Cyril and Methodius, they are almost always pictured with scrolls in their hands; the gift of written language was their gift to the people.

Or, we have the example of John Eliot here in Massachusetts. John Eliot was a Puritan missionary to Native Americans who translated the Bible into native languages around 1663. And he was incredibly successful, earning the title of "the Indian apostle." When you think of people like Cyril, Methodius, and John Eliot, it seems that their work was very much in line with the spirit of Pentecost. They were using language, the peoples' languages, to reach out to them and meet them on their own terms.

And it's so interesting to see different expressions of Christianity and what works for people. To see different translations of the same concepts. The spirit of Pentecost points to diversity, to people being at different places, to the challenge inherent in spreading the message of Jesus to people who may just not understand where you're coming from or how you view or practice your own faith.

Pentecost points to the difficulty in translating any seemingly "foreign" religion into the native language of various peoples. But it also points to these challenges as being able to be met with the help of God, with the gifts freely given by the Holy Spirit.

When I think of Pentecost, I actually think of my trip to China. Two days after I graduated from seminary, I hopped on a 14 hour flight to Hong Kong. I was part of a group of seminarians on the UCC's and Disciple of Christ's Council of Theological Students' Global Ministries Board. As part of this group, we were able to be part of a People to People Pilgrimage to China.

Our objective was to learn about Christianity in China, and though we did visit some of the classic tourist destinations like the Great Wall in Beijing and the Terra Cotta Army in Xi'an, we also visited nine different seminaries and met Christian leaders on the China Christian Council and even leaders in the Communist Party responsible for overseeing all of the religions in China. We were able to speak with many Christian ministers and seminarians and learn a great deal about how Christianity is practiced in China. And it was fascinating.

On one of the Sundays we were there, we attended church in the countryside. This congregation had about 1,200 members and probably 1,200 of them were in church that Sunday morning worshipping. It was a worship experience like nothing I had ever witnessed, both because of its style but mostly because of its intensity. Because of periods of repression, Chinese Christians have a real passion for their faith. They know that it could potentially be outlawed again depending on who's in power, so they practice their faith with a type of fervor that is unlike anything those of us on this trip had ever experienced.

At one point in the worship service, the minister got up and prayed aloud at the pulpit and then he asked people to pray along with him. It would be like me getting up to do the Pastoral Prayer after this sermon and asking you to pray your own prayers as I'm saying mine up here. So everyone in the congregation began to pray, mostly out loud, at the same time.

Some people were whispering, some were almost shouting, some were crying, some got down on their knees in the aisle, some sat down, most stood up, but all of them were praying their separate prayers at the same time but were praying them together. Over a thousand people were praying this way together!

This must have gone on for five minutes. At one point, I felt like I was on sensory overload and just closed my eyes to listen to all of these voices. Of course, they were praying in Mandarin, so I had no idea what they were saying, but I seemed to feel their prayers. I sensed the intensity of some and the quiet pleadings of others. I looked out again in the sanctuary and was absolutely amazed that they had the courage to pray out loud in this way. It was as if all of them were "filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Of course, they weren't speaking in other languages; they were almost one voice in many forms. They were one people with many parts. They were the body of Christ, though some were the head and the feet, others were the arms and the legs. And yet all of them were united in their prayers, they were united with all of us who were just visiting for the day and able to experience what a worship service at a typical countryside church in China was like. And it was truly remarkable.

Even though we were from different places, used to different styles of worship, and we spoke different languages, somehow this experience transcended all of that. In this case, it actually didn't matter that none of their prayers were translated for us because we could listen and look and feel the prayers all around us and say a few of our own too.

Pentecost is about reaching out to people in their own terms. The disciples and Cyril and Methodius, and John Eliot quite literally reached out to people through language. For the five of us seminarians in China, even though we couldn't understand on an intellectual level all of those prayers that Sunday morning, we all seemed to feel them and that was powerful enough.

Because the Spirit has a way of working in and through all of us. The very stories we know, the very traditions we hold onto about Pentecost point to meeting people where they are by using their own languages to convey the teachings of Jesus.

And what's so remarkable to me is that somehow the Spirit, the message; Jesus Christ himself has a way of transcending language to bring the Good News to all of us. We can see visions and dream dreams and pray prayers and worship God through it all. May it be so with us, Amen.