

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
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June 9, 2019 Pilgrim Church UCC Rev. Karen E. Gale

Spirited  
Acts 2:1-21

Here we are at Pentecost, a festival day in the church. The explosion of the Holy Spirit amidst a gathering of folks. The birthday of the church. A celebration. A miracle.

What was the miracle?

Well, that folks from all over the place could understand each other. They could hear each other. And they could hear their own language spoken by another.

But you know what? This isn't exactly true. I know, it's biblical. But I know for a fact that there was one language that was not represented there. It was Ikea-ish.

You have never heard of this language? Oh, I think you have. Have you ever purchased anything from Ikea, the big warehouse store? Yes, the things have Swedish names--it is a Swedish store after all. And the stuff is packed flat which means you put it together yourself.

But then when you get it home and pull out the instructions, they are not in English. Or Spanish. Or even Swedish. They are in Ikea-ish which is some odd pictogram-based language that NO ONE understands. And hence the proliferation of lopsided bookcases and interesting swear word combinations.

We just don't speak the language.

Another scripture lesson for today from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, is from Genesis, and it is the story of the Tower of Babel. In this text we read that folks all spoke one language and they worked together to build this tower to get up to the heavens where God is. God decides this isn't such a good idea so confuses them all by giving them different languages and thus the construction project is doomed. No one speaks the language.

The Pentecost story is seen as the undoing of Babel. Or the rebuilding of a world of harmony and understanding centered around the story of Jesus, his ministry, and miraculous resurrection. All these folks who had come to town for Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks, or the second most important Jewish holy day, had the reverse Babel effect. Understanding flowed through them. They heard and understood each other and were known. And then left carrying this amazing experience with them which meant the newly formed Christian faith went with them too and the church was born, not just in Jerusalem but all over the Roman world.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we did still understand each other the way these folks did. That we were in-spirited to love and joyful exuberance.

But that's not where we're at. And certainly it didn't take long for the church to move past its unifying moment into great bickering and misunderstanding as we learn from Paul's letters to the various churches where people were having trouble getting along with each other.

Speaking the same language is not easy, even if we actually speak the same dialect of the same actual spoken language. Except the truth is that we don't.

There is a popular relationship book titled *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. Chapman looked at couples to see why there was so much dissatisfaction among people who said they loved each other and took pains to show each other their love. What he says is that we understand demonstrated love differently--in five different ways.

Some people feel loved if they hear words of affirmation. Some feel loved if they receive gifts. Some feel loved if the other spends quality time with them, and so on. The trick is to love one's partner or spouse or beloved in the way that makes them feel loved. For example, I could give you a gift every week, but if gifts don't mean much to you and instead you are yearning to hear words of affirmation, you won't feel loved by me. We wouldn't be speaking the same language.

Pat asked his friend, Mike, what he'd bought his wife for Valentine's Day.  
"I've bought her a belt and a bag."  
"That sound good, I hope she appreciated the thought."  
Mike replied: "So do I, and hopefully the vacuum cleaner will work better now."

Not the same love language (unless she works as a housekeeper.) Then maybe. Uh, no.

In the church we struggle with this too. To speak the same language.

For example: when we say mission, what does that mean?  
Does it mean conversion of non-Christians to Christianity?  
Does it mean sending money or collecting cans to give to the poor?  
Does it mean advocating for changes to health care legislation or better protections for immigrants?

What about Christ died for you? Or saved you?  
Does it mean you are doomed if you don't believe in Christ  
Does it mean Christ showed us a way forward in love that ultimately saves us from cycles of violence and hatred?

We don't' speak the same language. Even when we do.

And when we don't speak the same language it can lead to everything from hurt feelings to all out war, at the national level and at the local church level.

There is a saying called Hanlon's Razor. It goes like this:  
"Do not attribute to malice what could equally be explained by stupidity."

Another, nicer way to say it is:  
"Don't assume bad intentions over neglect and misunderstanding."

This mindset shift can upend our normal language of default misunderstanding in the effort of seeking better understanding or giving people the benefit of the doubt. This can be truly transformative in the church. To listen with ears of the Holy Spirit.

For example:  
What if my name did not get included on the thank you list?  
First thought might be, "well, they don't like me. I'm not appreciated."  
Second thought can be instead, "well, it looks like the person in charge forgot a few names."  
Catch the difference? I was not omitted. Instead, the person doing the list messed up. Not malice, but human error.

Another example:

“Last week and the week before all four hymns came from the black hymnal. I hate the black hymnal!”

First thought, “well, the PC liturgical police are at it again! Why can’t we have any nice hymns anymore? (assumed bad intentions)”

Second thought, “I wonder why we haven’t had red hymnal hymns lately? (questioning)”

Third (and bonus) thought: “hmmm. There’s a hymn I really like in the red hymnal. I should come to the hymn sing and request it. Or talk to Karen or Dot to see if we can have it in worship soon.”

The difference? Accusation replaced by wondering. And wondering leading to taking personal responsibility.

In the church we are asked to work toward a common language which means centered on the love, compassion, forgiveness and peace of Jesus. The Spirit may have rushed through the room so everyone heard their own language. But the message was the same. The transformative power of Jesus life and ministry. We can through acts of compassion, love and service, speak across any barrier. But our mindset needs to be different.

We can learn to speak this language together as we practice week by week. Some weeks we do better than others. I mean it’s been 2,000 years and we are still practicing.

It is said that during a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up.

The rabbi, learned as he was in the Torah and Talmud, didn't know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound 98-year-old man, who was one of the original founders of their congregation. The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation.

The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, "Is it our tradition to stand during this prayer?"

The old man answered, "No that is not our tradition."

The one whose followers sat asked, "Is it our tradition to sit during Shema?" The old man answered, "No that is not our tradition."

Then the rabbi said to the old man, "The congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand..."

The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "THAT is our tradition!"

But it doesn’t have to be. Right now especially in these times of really divisive partisan politics playing out in the news each day. Right now especially with racial and anti-Semitic terrorist acts becoming more frequent. Right now where we talk past each other, or don’t even talk with someone who is too different from us, I think the church can model something different.

We can show how to speak together in a language that draws people together, that listens, that understands people as flawed and sometimes incompetent, and yet loves them anyway. That looks to the best in people instead of the worst. That emphasizes the oneness of Pentecost, the ability to be together and speak a voice of love to a hurting world.

And right now, as Pilgrim moves toward calling a settled pastor, shifting our mindset, allowing the Spirit in so that we can work toward speaking the same language, a language of love and forgiveness and benefit of the doubt, a language of peaceful intentions, that can prepare the way for the next pastoral leader coming here. Because undoubtedly, they will speak a language that at first might sound different to our ears.

Perhaps they might be a person whose first language was not English. Or someone with a speech disorder who sometimes stutters. Or someone with a southern accent. Or just someone who preaches about love and the community of God, the church, in new and unexpected ways.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Be present to us and unite us in a language of holy love. Amen.