

The Language of Faith

Sermon 19 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 9, 2019

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2: 1-21

I have always been a lover of language. My parents tell me in my earliest years they knew I would either be a lawyer or a preacher. I could talk myself out of any corner and defend myself against any accusation of wrongdoing – which presented some fun parenting challenges for them! I was fascinated by foreign languages as well. As early as possible I began taking French classes – which eventually led to a Bachelor’s degree in that language.

As my love of the French language grew, I began to discern a call to ministry. Though there was never a “Damascus Road” type of experience, I became more and more aware of how I felt alive and at home in churches and with my church friends. In those places, where people gathered together to study the Bible and share stories of faith, I was my truest self. Through programs like Girls in Action and Mission Friends, I had been taught that I could be a missionary, so when I began to accept that I might be called to ministry, I believed that ministry would take place in a foreign country. I continued to study French with a renewed commitment to learning the language, assuming I would use it in the mission field.

I applied numerous times through Baptist missions organizations to serve in French-speaking areas of Africa and Europe. You might imagine my surprise when they eventually sent me to Southeast Asia. I didn’t speak a word of Mandarin, what in the world was I going to say to the people I was sent to serve?

We arrived in Hong Kong for training before taking a smaller jet over to Kunming, a large city in Southeast China. The training attempted to help us memorize translations of scriptures that we learned in our churches back home in the U.S. and we all tried to learn them. But before long training was over and it was time for us to put our translating skills to the test.

Predictably, all four of us who went to Kunming and then on to a smaller city about 2 hours away, had forgotten everything we’d learned by the time we arrived at our destination.

“Shèngdàn kuàilè yēsū ài ni,” I heard a little Chinese boy say to me while I was handing out rice and bible verses with my missions partner on the streets one afternoon. While my pronunciation of the words would probably be indecipherable to a native speaker of Mandarin, I can still hear the little boy’s voice state them perfectly in my mind.

“Shèngdàn kuàilè yēsū ài ni.”

It took a little boy in Yunnan province to teach me the miracle of Pentecost and the truth about the Holy Spirit.

In today's reading from Acts 2, which is the original Pentecost story, we find the apostles gathered inside the room of a house in Jerusalem. They were all together as one body of followers in what seems to be a fairly orderly and calm setting. Then all of a sudden a noise like the sound of a violent wind disrupts the order and chaos ensues as those who had gathered for prayer saw tongues that looked like fire resting upon each one individually. And as they were touched by the fire they began to speak, each in a different language.

The noise must have been heard beyond the walls of the house because Jews from all over convene outside the house. This was no ordinary crowd either. It was Pentecost, seven weeks after Passover, when the harvest was over and the first offerings were made to God in celebration and thanksgiving. For this "festival of weeks," as it was known, Jews from all over would have traveled to Jerusalem, making it as multicultural as Times Square, Manhattan. People from every corner of the ancient world now gathered outside the house where the Spirit had stormed in. Foreigners from all over began to hear, miraculously, in their native languages, the stories of God's power. And yet others began to sneer saying, "They must be filled with new wine."

New Testament scholar, Justo González, concludes that those who sneered must have been the locals, the residents of Jerusalem who could not understand the foreign languages being proclaimed in their own city.¹ These were likely religious elites who may have felt like they had a handle on the Spirit. Perhaps they had already worked out their pneumatology, their theology, and their language of faith. With that kind of religious certainty, there was no need to understand, to hear, or to make sense of what was happening amongst the apostles and the foreigners that day. They could write it all off quickly by determining, "they're just drunk... speaking nonsense... that isn't how God speaks."

Over the years some have considered the Pentecost story a reversal of the story of Babel, in which people were scattered and languages confused to separate people from one another. While there are similarities between the two stories, a detailed reading of this story insists that we remember the languages remain distinct. In today's reading the foreigners hear in their native language.

The good news is not proclaimed in Aramaic (the language of Jesus and the disciples), the miracle is not that all understand a common language but that those who only spoke the local tongue began to speak in the language of foreigners.

In the broader narrative of Luke-Acts, and in our Christian tradition, this is the moment when the church is born. Jesus has ascended into heaven, the disciples are becoming

apostles, empowered by the Spirit who blew into their orderly room and equipped them with the ability to speak other languages, not the language of Jesus but the languages of their neighbors who had gathered outside.

“Shèngdàn kuàilè yēsū ài nǐ.”

A little boy taught me the language of faith in Southeast Asia. “Merry Christmas, Jesus loves you,” he said in his native tongue. His words surprised me because they were not what I had planned to say. I’d spent time learning John 3:16 and other theologically complex verses that meant something to me back home. I’d assumed that they would mean something to the people I would meet in China. But I was wrong.

Pentecost and the birth of the church begin with followers who begin to hear.

Wasn’t it Pentecost Sunday in 1983 when Dr. Lewis heard the Spirit beginning to speak a new language, one about a mission in Northwest Raleigh? Thirty-six years ago, some of you might have been there when he preached those words and made the invitation. Seventeen stepped out that day. Outside of the sanctuary where Raleigh Baptists had gathered together and into a new neighborhood with a new language of God who was doing a new thing! Nobody knew what the future would hold, nobody knew what the language of Greystone would sound like because it wasn’t fully formed yet. It was emerging, just like the church in Acts chapter two.

I wasn’t there in 1983 but I’m sure that there were those who couldn’t hear the Spirit moving and speaking this new language. Maybe they doubted that the new mission was needed. Maybe they couldn’t understand why the new neighbors in Northwest Raleigh needed their own place to worship, to build community, and to hear the good news of God’s power. Maybe they were scared that it wouldn’t be successful, or maybe they were scared that it *would* be.

Now that new language has become a little more established. The mission that was born 36 years ago is now a church with traditions and rich stories about how things used to be. We have our own way of doing things and our language (of sorts) that we share when we gather inside this building and celebrate the ways that God is working in our lives.

But I wonder, when was the last time we began to speak a new language... or many new languages?

I think about the people who fill the parking lot across the street night after night – which languages are they speaking?

I think about the residents at Springmoor and Whispering Pines and other neighborhoods within a mile of our church and I wonder what kinds of questions keep them awake at night? What kinds of relationships are they looking for?

Could we be better neighbors if we were better listeners?

I wonder if this Pentecost, like the one 36 years ago, if we might begin by listening to the Spirit who is longing to teach us new languages. What would it look like for us to begin speaking in the language of our neighbors who are stressed out and working around the clock with little time for family or friends? How might we share the good news with those who are weighed down with parenting and trying to hold their marriages together? Is there still good news in the Gospel for them? News that heals relationships, nourishes souls, and breathes new life into lifeless rhythms of work and play?

Maybe this Pentecost we could begin listening. Listening to the critiques of institutionalized religion that comes to us from the “nones” and the “dones”, those who say they have no need for institutionalized religion and those who have given it a chance and now they’re just done waiting for Christians to be a little more like Jesus and a little less like the institutional church.

Maybe the Spirit could move through us and equip us with new words of love and welcome, new rhythms of patience and compassion, and new life pouring out through us into our little corner of the world. Maybe we could just start there?

This kind of listening will require so much more than simply translating our programs and ministries from the 1980s to the 2020s. Anyone who speaks more than one language fluently can tell you that translation helps, but truly learning to speak another language requires immersing yourself in relationships with those for whom it is their mother tongue. You can’t speak a language fluently without tuning your ear to the cadence, pitch, and flow. To do that with a second language, you have to stop thinking in your own native tongue, and let the new words flow out uninhibited.

As protestant churches in America are standing on the brink of unprecedented decline, many are closing their doors because they cannot carry on like they did in the past. I wonder if this is our opportunity to discard some things and begin thinking and speaking a new tongue?

When we step outside this room, we may not see Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and Mesopotamians... but we will meet retirees, veterans, and single parents... we will encounter folks who are underserved, unappreciated, lonely and left out.

We may not find Judeans, Cappadocians, and Libyans but we will find hard workers, underemployed, and emotionally malnourished.

Do we have good news for them that we might be open to bringing in their mother tongue? Or will we insist on speaking in the same old ways that we've grown comfortable with in these last 36 years?

It seems to me the language of faith is always changing, always throwing open the doors, lighting the church on fire and calling disciples out into the world animated with the good news spoken in the languages of those who gather outside.

So, this Pentecost, the call is similar to the one that Dr. Lewis issued all those years ago. Who is willing to go out from this place with ears ready to listen, and mouths learning to speak a whole new language?

Could it be you?

ⁱ Justo L. González. *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 2001. p. 37-39.