



Sunday May 23, 2021
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15 (Day of Pentecost)
Acts 2:1-21

Pastor Tony Acompnado

Language

While on a mission trip to Haiti some years ago, the mission team I was with went to volunteer at a school of one of our partner ministries. When we arrived at the school, we were welcomed by a few dozen elementary school kids. We quickly realized that while the organizers who invited us there spoke English, none of the children did and none of us spoke French or Haitian Creole. It was a little disheartening that none of us were able to communicate with them beyond waving, smiling, and pathetic attempts at speaking English slowly and loudly in the hopes they would somehow understand us.

As we got organized and began working on the various projects we went there to accomplish, it continued to bother me that I couldn't communicate with these kids who kept following us around and curiously watching everything we were doing. Then suddenly I just couldn't take it any longer and I felt an overwhelming urge to do something about it, so I did the only thing I was pretty sure didn't need any language to communicate – I played a game.

I walked over to an open dirt area where some rocks were piled up and I gestured to the kids to help me take some of the rocks and begin forming them into several circles. I used one of the rocks to draw some lines in the dirt and then motioned to them that we were going to try to toss other rocks into the circle. Within a few moments these kids and I had created a game and more importantly a way to communicate and even play together. With each rock that landed in a circle there were smiles, high fives, cheering, and laughter.

Fast forward – a few months ago I felt compelled to start using a free language learning app to learn a bit more Spanish to better communicate with our Spanish speaking brothers and sisters. And while this may be a very small step, it nevertheless feels like an important and necessary act of hospitality.

What we might find easily accessible through a phone app comes directly to the first disciples on the Day of Pentecost. And as we celebrate Pentecost today, I wonder what actions you typically associate with the Holy Spirit? When you consider the Spirit's activity in the world, does communicating across differences of language, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, politics, and beliefs come to mind? What about building bridges of love and healing across ancient divides or helping you discover that the stranger is your brother or your sister?

Pentecost — from the Greek word literally meaning fifty, which is where we get the 50 days from Easter, was a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest. For Christians, Pentecost is a foundational moment in the formation of the church. In the Pentecost story in Acts, Luke says that the Spirit breaks into the place where the disciples were gathered and speaks through them empowering them to testify to the impact Jesus has had on their lives.

By every account it's an amazing story, filled with fascinating details – tongues of fire, rushing winds, and accusations of drunkenness. It's easy to get lost in all the noise and excitement. But there is one part of the story that stands out to me as particularly relevant for our time and place: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

When the disciples and their friends began to speak in foreign languages, the crowds who gathered outside their meeting place understood them. The fact that they comprehended what was being spoken is what confused them. They weren't confused by the message itself. What the crowds found baffling was that God would see fit to speak to them in their own languages. That God would welcome them so intimately, with words and expressions that paid particular attention to their birthplaces, their childhoods, and cultures of origin. As if to say, "This Spirit-filled place, this new Body of Christ, is yours. You don't have to feel like outsiders here; we speak your language, too. Come in. Come in and feel at home."

As Christians, we place great importance in language – in words. We love the creation stories of Genesis, in which God births the very cosmos into existence by speaking, "And God said." In the gospel of John, we read an incredible poem about the Incarnation, "In the beginning was the Word." On Sunday mornings, we profess our faith in the languages of liturgy, creed, prayer, and music. We believe that language has power – that words have both the power to make worlds and destroy them too.



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If you're bilingual, then you know that there's nothing easy about substituting one language for another. Languages are intricate and messy. They carry the full weight of their cultures and histories. To attempt one language instead of another is an act of exploration and of hospitality. To speak across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or politics is to challenge stereotypes and risk ridicule. It's a brave and disorienting act. A risky act.

But this is precisely what the Holy Spirit required of the frightened disciples. Essentially, the Spirit told them, stop hiding in fear in the places you find safe and comfortable. Throw open your windows and doors. Feel the pressure of my hand against your backs, pour yourselves into the very streets you've come to fear, and speak! Don't you understand? Silence is no longer an option.

What I love about the first Pentecost story is that it required surrender and humility on both sides. Those who spoke had to brave languages beyond their comfort zones. They had to risk vulnerability in the face of difference and do so without any guarantee of welcome. They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them — new words, strange words, scary words — were nevertheless essential words — words precisely intended for the time and place they occupied.

Meanwhile, the crowd who listened had to take risks as well. They had to check their disbelief, drop their precious defenses, and opt for curiosity and wonder instead of fear and contempt. They had to widen their circles and welcome strangers with accents into their midst.

But not all of them managed to — some smiled with contempt because they couldn't bear to have their neat categories of belonging and exclusion challenged. At the first sign of difference, they retreated into denial, "Nothing new is happening here. This isn't God. These are fools who've had too much to drink."

But even in that environment of suspicion and cynicism, some people spoke, and some people listened, and into those surprising exchanges, God breathed new life. The bottom line is, something happens when we speak each other's languages. We experience the limits of our own words and perspectives. We learn curiosity. We discover that the boundless actions of God are far too nuanced for a single voice or articulation.

The more I read this story, the more I'm convinced that Pentecost is a story for our time too. We live in a world where words have become toxic, where the languages of our prized "isms" threaten to divide and destroy us. The troubles of our day are global and catastrophic.

The violence across the Israeli-Palestinian divide had not ended despite a ceasefire. School children are being murdered, creation is being destroyed, and chaos rules the streets in many places. Our own country in a state of political and cultural gridlock so fierce, that we seem to have no capacity to communicate across our differences. The consequences, whether they have to do with the Covid pandemic, climate change, racial justice, or economic disparity, are too numerous to count. For many of us, the temptation to retreat into our safe zones is especially strong right now. We have difficulty seeing outside of our social media bubbles, we're skeptical of the possibility of genuine dialogue, and our faith waivers more than we care to admit.

But this is precisely why we need Pentecost. What mattered on that inaugural day of the church was not the verbal skills or the religious expertise of the disciples. What mattered was that they followed the instructions of Jesus to stay in one place, pray without ceasing, and wait for the Holy Spirit to come with power and do a new thing — both in them and through them. What mattered was that the disciples — incompetent and clueless as they so often were — obeyed the prompting of the Spirit and allowed themselves to be transformed by the wind, the fire, the breath, and the tongues of God. Everything else followed from that.

There's no way to overemphasize how much we need to gather as God's people right now and ask the Holy Spirit to instruct us, shape us, remake us, and commission us. We need fresh languages of bridge-building. We need new words to rekindle love. We need the wind and fire of God to challenge our complacencies, reset our priorities, ease our anxieties, and move us out. As Jesus himself said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The most compelling witness that any of us can give is to love one another as Jesus did — both in what we say and what we do.



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Because no matter how passionately we may disagree with each other's opinions and beliefs, we cannot disagree with their experiences. Once we've have learned to hear and speak their stories in the words that matter most to them, then we're invested in a way that we never had been before. We can no longer thrive at their expense. We can no longer make them our "other." We can no longer abandon them.

It makes me wonder then what the church would be like if we allowed the Holy Spirit to transform it into a place of deep and embedded belonging – not for the few, but for everyone. I wonder how our ministries would need to change so that the crowds listening outside our doors would hear "Welcome!" in languages they comprehend.

My friends, can we hear it? Can we dare to hear what the Spirit is saying? Stop hiding. Stop hesitating. Speak. And for all the times when we don't have the words for our prayers, our cries, or our responses, then we need to trust in the Holy Spirit of God – our advocate, comforter, and helper who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit has come, and silence is no longer an option. Listen to what the Spirit is saying to us – God is doing something new, and we can be a part of it – we can be on fire for the healing of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen!