

“Speak People, Fluently”

Acts 2:1-13

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I grew up in southwest Virginia, surrounded by people from similar religious, political, and cultural backgrounds. So it was something of a revelation to move into my dorm room at Middlebury College in Vermont.

Next door lived two women who would become my best friends: one from DC, who was Jewish and had relatives who perished in the Holocaust; the other was from Boston, from a Greek Orthodox family whose grandparents emigrated from Greece to America. Both of them exposed me to new religious rituals and traditions, including my first Passover Seder and Orthodox Easter. And they introduced me to some spectacular foods—kugel and matzo-ball soup, baklava and spanakopita. I learned a lot in college—much of it outside the classroom!

What I learned **in** the classroom was languages. Sophomore year, I decided to take ancient Greek so that I could read the New Testament in the original language. Greek was part of the Classics Department and there I found myself immersed in a whole different culture—the logic and precision and mathematical nature of the Greek language, as well as the philosophical assumptions of the ancient Greeks.

Later that year I enrolled in Biblical Hebrew, and when I showed up for the first day of class, I met my professor, who was an ordained rabbi, and three other classmates who had learned Hebrew in preparation for their bar mitzvahs. Once again, as I struggled to learn this strange language with a whole different alphabet and way of writing and reading, I was immersed in a new culture as well, one shaped by the stories and people of the Hebrew Bible.

Learning another language connects us to the people for whom that language is their native tongue. Language brings us together, not just through sound and speech, but through culture and memory, land and place, food and fashion, art and stories.

In this way, says Acts scholar Willie Jennings, language creates intimacy. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes and enables the gathered disciples to suddenly and fluently speak the languages of the peoples who have come from other lands to live in or visit Jerusalem. Jennings claims it is “this revolutionary intimacy ... [which gives] birth to a **belonging** we will call church.”¹

The disciples had waited for the Holy Spirit since Jesus promised it would come and give them power to share the gospel. And indeed, when the Holy Spirit arrives, it gives them the ability to speak new languages so that all people could hear of the love and grace of God. In this story, language gives rise to belonging. When the gathered disciples start talking about Jesus in languages they had not previously known,

it creates powerful connections between the disciples and the Jews from every nation who had settled in Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, this miracle raises a question for those who witness it: “*What does this mean?*” they ask. Jennings invites us to ask an additional question: “What is God doing here and now?” The answer—always—is this: God is sending the Holy Spirit to empower *us*.

And the Spirit empowers us to speak to one another, hear one another, understand one other, and overcome divisions of all kinds—not just divisions created by language and culture and experience, but divisions created by education and class and politics and race and religion—all these divisions that the gospel breaks down.

What does this mean? It means, that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, *everyone belongs*.

The late Arthur Schlesinger wrote a book in the 1990s in which he raised concerns about what he called the looming “Balkanization” of American society. He worried that tribal interests and ethnic identities would unravel the fragile bonds of unity in American culture. He predicted that if left unchecked, America would see the kind of social disintegration that occurred in the former Yugoslavia and eventually led to ethnic cleansing.²

It’s not hard to see the wisdom in Schlesinger’s prediction. And yet, Pentecost suggests that God imagines and conscripts us in a very different endeavor, one in which the things that divide us become the very things that invite us to move closer to each other in wonder and curiosity, to move beyond our circles of comfort and familiarity and get to know people who are not just strangers but who may even seem strange to us.

This is the power Holy Spirit grants us, a Spirit-filled desire to know and understand and connect with people whose lives and backgrounds and culture differ from ours. After all, writes Jennings, “God speaks people, fluently. And God, with all the urgency that is with the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently too.”

The meaning of Pentecost is that everyone belongs. But the miracle of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit enables us to *speak people, fluently*, so that we might all discover the belonging we call the church.

Matthew Desmond grew up in the railroad town of Winslow, Arizona—yes, the one from the Eagles’ song. His dad was a pastor and his family never had a lot of money. The bills didn’t get paid and their utilities got turned off. While Desmond was in college, his family lost their home. “That experience worked its way inside of me,” he says, “and made me see how poverty diminishes and stresses a family.”

Desmond became a sociologist and when he decided to write a book about America’s housing crisis, he moved to Milwaukee where he lived in a mobile home park on the south side and then in a rooming house on the north side. Desmond became intimately acquainted with the families around him.

“[I] saw a level of poverty I’ve just never seen or experienced,” he says, “... grandmas living without heat in the winter ... kids getting evicted.” He followed families to eviction court and shelters, watched their kids, slept on their floors, ate at their tables, went to funerals, even a birth. He also got to know the landlords, getting just as close to them as to their tenants, helping them fix up their properties and pass out eviction notices.

Matthew Desmond learned to speak people, fluently; people whose experiences and challenges he recognized but did not know until he lived among them. And that led him to realize “that I’m accountable to folks that are struggling ... when you get proximate to families that are enduring a level of hardship that so many of us can’t even imagine, it really washes over you. It makes you accountable to the problem in a different way.”

He concludes, “I think there’s some spiritual violence we do to our lives when we live apart from each other, when we’re segregated from each other ... There’s real happiness, there’s real joy in binding your lives to folks that are quite different from you ...”³

Before the arrival of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’s disciples kept to themselves. They were confused and afraid and uncertain of what was going to happen now that Jesus had gone. The Holy Spirit comes bearing the joyful news that they don’t have to be afraid anymore, don’t have to associate only with those who see things the way they do. And to prove it, the Spirit gifts them with the very thing they need to connect with others: the ability to communicate with people outside their circle, to share the good news and to hear what others had to say about what God’s love means for them.

The meaning of Pentecost is that everyone belongs—to God and to each other. And the miracle of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit enables us to speak people, fluently.

Our experiences of the Holy Spirit today, in our various churches and ministries, will probably be a little more subtle than suddenly being able to speak new languages. But if the Spirit empowers us to speak people, fluently, then could it be the Spirit at work whenever we step out of our comfort zones and get close to people who are different from us?

In a recent episode of the hit TV show “Ted Lasso,” a player on a football team finally comes out as gay to his teammates. Their response is almost anticlimactic. “That’s cool, bro” they reassure him, and then one says, “You’re gay, big whoop, we don’t care.”

But then Coach Lasso speaks up, “Hold on,” he says, “that’s not quite right. We do care ... we care very much, because we care about who you are and what you must’ve been going through. And from now on, you don’t have to go through it by yourself.”

“Yeah,” another player says, “You’ve got us. We’ve got you.”⁴

The **meaning** of Pentecost is that everyone belongs—because God cares about everyone and invites us to care, too. And the **miracle** of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit enables us to speak people, fluently.

Today, may we be ready and open and willing to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, to learn a new language, to speak people, fluently, and to rediscover and joyfully proclaim the promise of the gospel: everyone belongs.

Notes

1. Jennings, Willie James, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).
2. Michael Jenkins, “Acts 2:1-21, Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. WJK Press, 2010.
3. “Matthew Desmond on America’s Addiction to Poverty,” podcast, *The Ezra Klein Show*, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/21/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-matthew-desmond.html?showTranscript=1>
4. “Ted Lasso,” Season 4, Episode 9.