

Sermon: “Each in Their Own Language”

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 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.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Acts 2:1-13

If you’ve spent any time in the world of staff bonding or in corporate workshops committed to building a collaborative team, chances are you’ve run into a slew of personality inventories like the Enneagram or StrengthsFinder or the Myers Briggs test. These inventories, each made up of a number of questions meant to tease apart the particularities of your personality, are meant to help you learn more about yourself and the people you’re living or working alongside. They’re meant to help you recognize your own values and priorities, how you lead, influence, communicate, collaborate, negotiate business, and even manage stress. And they’re meant to help you understand how other people do these things differently than you do. At their best, these inventories help us to understand one another more and to have a common language for understanding one another when we’re often working and living alongside people who speak a different relational or emotional language than we do.

Another form of this same idea comes out in the study of love and relationships in books like *The Five Love Languages*, a book that argues you may feel love differently than your partner does. And thus, understanding and decoding these different ways of showing love will help take the guesswork out of your partner’s expectations and needs. The goal being to give insight not only into your own personality, but also to provide valuable information on how to better relate to other people you care

about and love. In other words, how to speak the same language when you come from such different ones.

I think this is part of what fascinates us and captures our attention and imagination in this Pentecost text. People from a wide range of diversity and language all being transformed by the Spirit of God such that they could understand one another. So much difference, so many languages ... a cacophony of diversity filling the room where the Spirit came to dwell.

But—you see, this is the part that's always stumped me a little bit—if you read closely, the Spirit came and landed upon those who were already very much the same. Remember from the text, it says, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place [they, meaning the disciples] 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 [again, all disciples, all in the same place]. 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.” But they already understood each other. Why did it matter that they spoke in other languages as the spirit gave them ability?

It mattered because of who else was in town that day. The text continues, “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound”... at the sound of this rushing wind, this cacophony of languages, at this sound, a crowd of these Jews from every nation gathered and were bewildered because each one heard the disciples speaking in their own native language—in a language that was native to them. In a language that the disciples would not have known because they were Galilean. But the crowd that gathered, amidst all the diversity they represented, all of them heard their own language that day: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, the list goes on and on. But the purpose was not so they could understand one another. The purpose was so that every person gathered that day could *hear* the good news of God's deeds of power. It wasn't about the people. It was about the God they were called to serve.

Each of them, in their own language, heard the good news of the gospel; good news they had never heard before. Good news that told of a Savior who was crucified and died for them. Good news that had been prophesied centuries ago by the prophet Joel and by David himself—good news that once and for all, death had been defeated. Good news that they were never alone and the arrival of this Spirit was proof. Good news that God was on the move and it was happening before their very eyes. For they each heard the good news of the gospel in their own language.

Just think of how different it could have been. Just for a moment, imagine with me a much easier way this could have been accomplished. God could have placed this Spirit of fire on the *ears* of those arriving from every nation—God could have changed the hearers' ability to understand the language that was already being spoken by Christ's followers, but God did not. God did not put the onus on those outside

the body of Christ to find a way in. God put the onus on those inside the body of Christ to find a way out into the world and to extend God's welcome and God's love to each in their own languages.

God could have rested that fire on every ear such that everyone understood the language of the Galileans. But God did not. God the Spirit valued the diversity present in Jerusalem that day. God the Spirit blessed the diversity in Jerusalem that day, and God the Spirit empowered those who could not yet imagine the wideness of God's love and God's welcome to take that love and welcome into the diversity of the world—in languages they never knew they could speak and in languages they never even knew existed.

Each of them, in their own language, heard the good news of the gospel: You are welcomed and you are loved.

The point of Pentecost was not about everyone learning the same language or about any one person understanding another. The purpose of Pentecost was that God's deeds of power and God's unending love and God's wide welcome were being extended further than they had ever been extended before. Can you imagine the power of that moment? The surprise? The delight?

Recently, a friend shared a story with me about a church not far from here. A small church that most folks drove past without even noticing it. One member of this church was Emma. Since her birth, Emma had been confined to a wheelchair, unable to walk or speak—at least in the ways that most of us would define speech. Emma would occasionally cry out during worship and especially during the hymns, perhaps joining in the cacophony of praise offered to God each Sunday morning. The congregation never minded, even when Emma's yells or moans made it difficult to pay attention to the sermon. They only ever wanted Emma and her family to feel welcome.

In fact, not long after Emma and her family started attending the church, a few folks offered to build a wheelchair ramp that gave direct access to the sanctuary so that Emma and her parents didn't have to walk the long way around the church for her to come to worship. It wasn't a big deal. There was no vote taken on it, no fanfare attached to it. Emma and her family just showed up one Sunday as they always did, and a member of the buildings committee was waiting outside to make sure their family knew they didn't have to walk around the whole building anymore.

Shortly after that someone on the worship committee learned that Emma loved balloons and responded joyfully to the color red. It was her very favorite color. And so from that point on, every Pentecost Sunday, that small church that most folks drove past without even noticing it, well, that church was filled to the brim with red balloons. And every Pentecost Sunday, the joy of the Lord could be heard in Emma's ecstatic squeals from the moment she entered the sanctuary. For they each heard the good news of the gospel in their own language. You are welcomed and you are loved.

In June of 2019, Howie Dittman very unexpectedly found himself going viral on the internet because he had attended a parade. Out in Pittsburgh, Howie joined a few

women who were traveling to the Pittsburgh PRIDE parade wearing t-shirts that said “Free Mom Hugs,” and he went wearing his own shirt that he’d purchased for the occasion that said “Free Dad Hugs.” Howie didn’t quite know what to expect other than joy and celebration in this parade, but he was shocked by the number of people who came running up to him or who saw him from across a street and made a beeline for him and wept in his arms and didn’t let go. Some of them said, “thank you, thank you, thank you” over and over. Some just wept. A 28 year old, a 19 year old, a 50 year old, all weeping in a stranger’s arms because it was a welcome and a love they had not known elsewhere. For they each heard the good news of the gospel in their own language. You are welcomed and you are loved.

It makes me wonder what languages God might call us to learn—what languages we cannot yet imagine or fathom that the Spirit will empower us to practice. I can guarantee you if we’re listening to the Spirit closely, they will not be languages that make our circles smaller or languages taught to outsiders so they can be more like us. No, the Spirit of God is far more wild and wondrous than that. For, thanks be to God, each will hear the good news of the gospel in their own language. O, that we might be a church willing to learn those languages too. You are welcomed and you are loved. Thanks be to God.