

In their own language

Acts 2:1-21

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Introduction

When I was chaplain of Salem Academy and College, one of my duties was to give the opening invocation and closing benediction at major events, such as convocation and commencement. My predecessor, Wayne Burkette, called this doing the brackets of the service. On Founders Day each year I did things a little differently by giving the familiar benediction in German, the language that the founders of Salem spoke. “Der Herr segne dich und behüte dich. Der Herr lasse sein Angesicht über dir erleuchten und sei dir gnädig. Der Herr erhebe sein Angesicht über dir und gebe dir Frieden. Im namen Jesus. Amen.” The Lord bless you and keep you. The make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. In the name of Jesus. Amen. I once presided at a wedding for a recent alumna of Salem who asked me to do the blessing in German to honor her German ancestry. Of course I complied. Afterward the wedding photographer came up to me with tears in his eyes and told me that he had immigrated many years before. He said that this was the first time since coming to America that he had been blessed in his own language, and he was grateful for that.

This man was speaking to a universal truth about humans. No matter how many languages a person speaks, your mother tongue is the most beautiful. It is called the mother tongue because it is the language you heard before you were born, the language that was used to sing you to sleep, the language that you used to call out to your parents when you were happy or frightened. The language of your dreams. I’m pretty sure that everyone in the world feels that God speaks their language. Many Americans believe that God not only speaks English, but he speaks in the voice of James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman.

Pentecost

I was reminded of that wedding I did over 20 years ago while pondering our lesson from the Book of Acts, which tells the story of the day of Pentecost when people gathered in Jerusalem heard apostles preaching in their mother tongues. Before we unpack the meaning the meaning of this text, let’s first pause and consider the scene described in Acts. Today we think of Pentecost only as a Christian holiday, but Acts

tells that people had gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. Shavuot comes fifty days after Passover. In ancient Israel, Shavuot was a day of thanksgiving for the spring harvest. Each year Jewish pilgrims would come to the Temple to sacrifice the first fruits of the harvest to God. By the time of Jesus, Shavuot had also become a day to celebrate the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt Sinai. Shavuot commemorates the covenant between God and Israel. In Jesus' day, it was considered a special blessing to travel to Jerusalem and offer your Shavuot sacrifice in the Temple.

A couple of weeks ago, Ginny spared me from having to read a long list of hard to pronounce place names, so today I returned the favor. I won't read all the places named in Acts a second time, but to tell you the truth, I've never heard of some of these places, like Pamphylia and the "parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene." It is impressive summary of the countries and territories in the Ancient Near East, and it was clearly important to Luke to make sure he wrote them all down even if it makes the narrative a bit awkward. On our maps today, these place would be in Greece, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq.

Diaspora

I'm sure you are wondering how come there were Jews from places that are hundreds of miles from Judea. The Diaspora or the Dispersion of the Jews started when the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires conquered Israel and Judah and took tens of thousands of people into captivity. Many Jews who had been taken from their homeland settled in their new lands and built new lives. They built homes, planted farms, opened shops, and established synagogues for prayer and worship. Then more empires emerged and disrupted people's lives. There were the Medes, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Jews migrated to large cities that grew up throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean Sea, including Alexandria, Corinth, Medina, Antioch, and Rome. They learned to speak the languages spoken in those places, and their rabbis helped them observe the law of Moses in different cultural contexts.

Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, became a sacred language used by priests and rabbis, much like Latin used to be the language used to be the language of the Roman Catholic Church. Hebrew was no longer the language that people dreamed in, that that they sang lullabies in, and did business in. It was for rituals and study, not for

daily life. Jews in the first century worshiped the same God and followed the same laws of Moses, but they lived in many lands and spoke many languages..

Languages

Luke tells us that it was at the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost, when thousands of Jews and converts to Judaism came to Jerusalem to celebrate the day of Thanksgiving that the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles. Thousands of people had been listening to priests singing in Hebrew and reading from the Hebrew Bible, but many of them would not have understood what was said. Even for those who understood the words with their heads, it would not have touched their hearts.

But one year, perhaps the same year that Jesus had been crucified, the apostles preached to the crowds. Peter, James, John and the others were not priests, rabbis, or scholars. They had all been disciples of Jesus and they had seen him after he had been raised from the dead. That was all they needed to know. The Holy Spirit gave them the courage to stand in the Temple grounds and proclaim the good news of a great miracle. Jesus Christ, whom the priests had condemned, had been raised from the dead by the power of God.

It was an extraordinary story, but what amazed the crowds most was the fact that they *heard* the story of Jesus in their own language. This is the miracle of Pentecost that we celebrate year after year. The apostles were not speaking in an unknown spiritual language, or “tongues,” as modern Pentecostals say. They were preaching the good news, and the Holy Spirit made it possible for everyone to hear the gospel in *their language*, their mother tongue. People who spoke Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Latin, and other languages in their daily life were able to *bear* what the apostles were saying and *feel in their hearts* that it was true. The Holy Spirit was acting as a universal translator. The curse of the Tower of Babel was overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost tells us that the good news of Jesus Christ cannot be held captive by one language, one temple, one sacred city, or one nationality. We often call Pentecost the Birthday of the Church, and it is important to recognize that the church that was born on Pentecost was made up of people from different nations speaking different languages. The church was diverse from the start. No one was excluded. The Holy Spirit included everyone.

Moravians

John Hus and his followers in Bohemia and Moravia believed in the power of the Gospel. They thought that the Catholic Church was wrong to make the gospel hostage to the Latin language. Hus and his colleagues preached in Czech and taught the people to sing and pray in Czech. Our Moravian ancestors in Bohemia and Moravia risked their lives to give people the Bible in their mother language. They wanted people to know that they are loved by God, so they used the language that spoke to their minds and hearts of the people. Like the photographer at the wedding, they had tears in their eyes as they heard God's words in their own language.

Count Zinzendorf and our Moravian ancestors who built this community of Salem believed that they were living in a new age of the Holy Spirit. They felt the Spirit urging them to leave the safety of their homeland and cross oceans to tell people the good news of Jesus Christ. They trusted that the Holy Spirit would help them learn the languages that people spoke in other lands so they could know they were saved by Christ. They translated hymns into other languages so people could sing their children to sleep with songs about their Savior. Moravians learned to sing God's praises in Inuktitut, Khoisan, Surinamese, Tibetan, Lenape, Mohican, Miskitu, and many more languages. They translated the gospel so people could read for themselves the good news of Jesus. Like the first apostles, Zinzendorf and the Moravians believed that no place on earth is God-forsaken. The gospel can be preached in every tongue.

Conclusion

In a few minutes we will be sharing in the sacrament of Holy Communion, the most sacred ritual in the Christian tradition. In this simple act of sharing a cup and pieces of bread, we remember Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world. As we partake of the bread and cup, may we rejoice that the miracle of Pentecost continues today. As we sing and pray in English, may we rejoice we are united in the Holy Spirit with God's children around the world who are celebrating this holy day in Spanish, Korean, Miskitu, Swahili, and a thousand other tongues. As we eat this bread and drink this cup, let us rejoice that we are part of the heavenly choir from every nation and tribe who are singing "worthy is the Lamb once slain."