

The Gift of Language

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Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my servants, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

It has been nearly forty years since pastoral theologian, Henri Nouwen wrote *The Way of the Heart*, however the observations he made back then about language seem even more relevant today.

Nouwen wrote:

“Over the last few decades we have been inundated by a torrent of words... words softly whispered, loudly proclaimed, or angrily screamed... They form the floor, and walls, and ceiling of our existence, saying: Use me, take me, buy me, believe me, trust me....”

Nouwen asked: “In such a world, who can maintain respect for words?” Then he answers his own question:

“All this is to suggest that words, my own included, have lost their creative power. Their limitless multiplication has made us lose confidence in words and cause us to think, more often than not, *they are just words*, ... The result of which is that the main function of the word, which is communication, is no longer realized. The word no longer communicates, no longer fosters communion, no longer creates community, and therefore no longer gives life. The word no longer offers trustworthy ground on which people can meet each other and build society.”¹

Those insightful words were written long before people were instantly looking at a phone in hand all day and reading all manner of communications, much less listening only to the channel of their choice. Nouwen’s observation feels prophetic, even prescient now, forecasting a future where today we are more inundated with words, and overwhelmed by how meaningless they can be.

Furthermore, the fact that ours is a time when so many lies are presented as truth, and human speech is often a weapon intended to align

¹ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*.

and divide, rather than foster community, we have to wonder whether we can even describe language as a gift anymore.... Certainly not the gift that God intended.

There are a lot of amazing things about this passage of scripture recounting the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost: the vastly diverse people gathered from all over the known world; the flames of fire resting upon the heads of each; the ecstatic conversation in tongues; Peter's riveting sermon declaring the prophecy of Joel is being fulfilled right there, right then; As amazing as each aspect of the Pentecostal story may seem – the eclectic crowd, the hair on fire, the inspired ecstasy – none is more significant than the gift of understanding. That was the gift of Pentecost, that these many and diverse peoples should understand one another.

And at this sound, the text tells us, the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? We hear them telling in our own tongues, the mighty works of God.

The gift of language and understanding is the heart and gospel truth of Pentecost. It is the call of God upon the church, in our time, while so much speech is anti-Asian, anti-Arab, anti-Semitic, Q-Anon, racist, xenophobic, violent and divisive. Pentecost is God's gift of the Spirit to recover human language for understanding, for unifying the human family.

Harvard Chaplain, Peter Gomes, said of this gift: "The diversity we celebrate so frequently and loudly is often not a blessing but a curse, and it has served to do little in this world but maintain the differences and erect a wall of ethno-centrism behind which we can hide and from which we can protect ourselves against others. At Pentecost, diversity was overcome by a power that transcended it, the power to understand,

to hear in one's own language the wonderful works of God. The gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity of that great crowd; the people did not cease to be Medes, Persians, and Elamites. They were not reduced to some vague generality without past or place. No, they did not become less than they were, they became more than they had been, for they became at one with all of those who heard and understood that God was alive, that God was active in this world and eager that they, all of them, should participate in God's purposes." ² It was the gift of language, fired up by the Holy Spirit, that created understanding of God's good intentions for humankind.

Each year, the Oxford English Dictionary monitors the use of the English language and gathers a corpus of over eleven billion words to determine a word or phrase used so often as to describe the year. In 2013, – it was selfie; 2016 – post-truth; in 2018 – toxic; 2019 – climate emergency. Interestingly in 2015 – it was not a word at all, but an actual emoji – a little round yellow face crying tears of joy. This past year in 2020, they found that not one word would do, so they came up with a list of words and phrases to describe the *unprecedented* year: Lockdown; Pandemic; Personal protective equipment; self-isolate; social distancing; systemic racism, take a knee, twindemic, unmute, wokeness, and the last word was Zoom-bombing – the practice of infiltrating video conference calls by posting violent, pornographic or offensive content. ³

2020 was a very difficult year for all of us, and it shows in our language. With readings from the Acts of the Apostles as our biblical guide, over the last couple of weeks, we have considered how we – as a Christian community – might emerge from this pandemic season; how we might re-think the values we cherish as a diverse congregation called to a common purpose to love God and love neighbor; and how we might consider our own individual calls to discipleship as an opportunity

² Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 100.

³ public.oed.com.

to contribute to the needs of others. Today, I believe, this story of Pentecost is challenging us to remember that human speech is a gift from God which is intended to celebrate human diversity and to foster understanding. It gives us a vision and a dream, to use Joel's language, to counter the world's lexicon from selfie and post-truth to lock-down and zoom-bombing with our God given vocabulary, of faith, hope, love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, justice, self-sacrifice, and peace. The Spirit is calling us to let our words guide our actions as followers of the Risen Christ.

This past week, while the world sat on edge watching the extreme violence that has erupted in Israel and particularly in Palestine, the head of trauma surgery at the southern tip of Tel Aviv wrote of his experiences. Adam Goldstein describes his hospital as located amid one of the most diverse, elderly and neglected populations in Israel. It's a working-class neighborhood filled with Jews and Arabs, recent immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and countries in the former Soviet Union. The hospital trains residents from all over the world, particularly places where expertise in trauma surgery is most needed, from Africa and Latin America, to the West Bank and Gaza. He described what it was like to hear the voice over the hospital's intercom saying, "Red alert," as medics and volunteers, some as young as fifteen, ran to ambulances and returned within the hour carrying more than forty patients to the emergency room.

Just last week he wrote, "As I looked around at my colleagues, I couldn't help but notice the diversity of our team. From the trauma center to the inpatient ward to the operating rooms, this was a team of Arabs, Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze, and I'm sure a few others... One of our Arab nurses would thoroughly treat a Jewish wounded woman; a Jewish intern examined a young Arab man who had been injured by a rubber bullet to the chest. An Arab specialist checked the wounds of a Jewish man who had been beaten, and a Jewish nurse cleaned the blood off the forehead of an Arab boy.... The team here is constantly ready to come into work at any hour, willing to sacrifice

themselves to help, to do whatever is needed. I hope that what is happening now under the roof of this hospital – the selflessness, the lack of ego, the teamwork and diversity and mutual respect – can be a model for this entire country, for our entire region. If neighbors and communities can't work together, can't get along in the way that I see every night in our hospital, I worry that we are guaranteeing that the suffering will only get worse. If we do come together, as we do inside our walls, it will be a beautiful thing.”⁴

Friends, that beautiful thing about Pentecost is the language of understanding. Across all manner of diversity, finding a common purpose for healing one another, for healing the world. With mighty wind and cloven tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit descended, and overcame human differences and united that diverse company with the gift of understanding. Suddenly they knew who and whose they were. By a power beyond the definitions of themselves, their words were transformed to speak up for the human family and the world, and to declare *the mighty works of God*. May it be so with us – even us.

AMEN.

⁴ Adam Goldstein, “I’m a Trauma Surgeon in Israel. In My Hospital, We Are in this Together,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2021.