

## **The languages of the Holy Spirit**

Many years ago, my brother lived in Japan for a year and my sister and I got to visit him on his company's dime. They flew us over and we spent a couple of weeks seeing the sights and eating the foods of Tokyo, Kyoto, and some smaller towns. For almost the entire trip my sister and I, who only spoke English, were in a protective bubble as far as communication goes. Everywhere we went, our brother translated us to the Japanese and the Japanese us. Of course many of the Japanese also spoke English.

Toward the end of our stay, we ran a couple of errands on our own. It was exhausting! Without the bubble our brother had provided for us, we had to look and listen twice as hard for directions and instructions. It was a major accomplishment to determine if this package really contained yogurt or if that snack was sweet fish-flavored.

We could do it. Barely. But there was a palpable relief each time we saw a sign in our own language or heard a voice speaking English - even if it wasn't to us!

This must be a tiny bit similar to the experience of immigrants who lived in Jerusalem at the time of that first Christian Pentecost. Imagine what that was like. These were Jews from all across the Mediterranean world whose families had moved to Jerusalem. They were simultaneously residents and strangers. One day, they heard a mighty and terrifying wind coming from one of the houses, they saw people with what looked like tongues of fire on them.

And yet the thing that bewildered them was not the wind or the flames it was the fact that people they did not know were proclaiming the Good News in their natal languages.

Now, it is important to know that all of the people in this story spoke a common language - they all spoke Greek, no matter their family origin. Greek was the language of commerce, law, and public life. You had to speak Greek to get along in your everyday life, no matter what you spoke at home. But it was also the language of the empire that oppressed them and tried to erase their unique cultures.

So to hear a message about the deeds of God in their own languages was astonishing. Those that heard it wondered what it meant. Those of us who hear the Good News in English today might consider the same question. Perhaps we take it for granted that Scripture is available in hundreds of languages all around the world. But what does that mean?

Humans are born with the capacity for language. One of the first tasks of our lives is to sort the many sounds around us into categories and privilege those that are words. The task for the rest of our lives is to arrange those words into sentences and paragraphs, stories and histories, philosophies and laws. And even scripture.

And even though it is our individual brains that are set up to do this, having and using language isn't something we do on our own. We do it because of our connection to our parents, siblings, and other caregivers. The reason we have and need language as part of our humanity is to connect us.

If you eventually learn many languages, there is something special about your native or first language - I've known people who default to their first language late in life, whether due to hearing loss or memory problems or simply for comfort. There are studies demonstrating that your first language becomes the filter through which you hear and learn any other language.

Language is, of course, an important way that we communicate ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Yet it is also intimately connected to culture. If you learn American English, “the 4th” means something very different than if you are from Kenya, Australia or India - all places where English is spoken. I know this because I am married to an Englishman - we mean entirely different things when we talk about chips, biscuits, or football.

What happened on that first Christian Pentecost is that, in the words Peter quoted from the prophet Joel, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon all flesh. The Holy Spirit came to those people where they were and in their own first languages. The disciples who are telling of God’s deeds of power are speaking the languages of the many people around them. The speakers may not have even understood what they were saying.

So at the same time we recognize that God comes to us where we are, in our own language, we celebrate that God also comes to others in their own languages.

Pentecost gave the followers of Jesus the power to tell the good news in every language - and the gift of hearing it in every language. From that day forward, the multilingualism and multiculturalism of the church has been a great strength and opportunity, even as it has been a difficult struggle. For one thing, languages are different from one another, they don’t all share the same concepts or cultural assumptions. To tell a story in multiple languages requires interpretation and translation. To understand it requires listening.

For instance, not all languages have words for what we mean by “God.” They might have multiple words or one word that has multiple meanings that are similar. It is an act of interpretation, translation, and listening to convey what we mean by the Hebrew words “Elohim” or “Yahweh” into other languages. Many Christians know that Greek has 7 words for “love” and English

only one. Conveying what the first generations of Christians understood by “love” is difficult. And yet we make those translations, in the process learning new ways to express “God” and “Love” that expand our knowledge and our faith.

It is important for us to remember this not only in regard to spoken, written, and signed languages, but also in the myriad ways we experience and give voice to the presence of God in our lives. If the Holy Spirit comes to us in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin, it is true that she also comes to us in our wealth and poverty, our gender and orientation, our age and race. People who live in the Arctic will have experiences of God that are different than those who live in the desert, and because of that we can learn more about our infinite God when we listen to those voices.

So together with those who heard about God’s deeds in their own languages that first Pentecost, we should ask, “What does it mean?” What does it mean that some hear about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in a way that you and I can’t understand? What does it mean that you and I may tell that story in a way that is heard in a different way? Since this is the way the Holy Spirit is poured on us, I think we accept it as a gift and an opportunity.

Pentecost is a day when we celebrate our unity AND our diversity in the Body of Christ. Being church doesn’t erase our differences, it honors and uses them. Sometimes those who are hearing the truth will be those who don’t speak the dominant language. Some who tell about the deeds of God will do so from a perspective entirely new to us, allowing us to understand more fully the God who loves us.

We believe that the Holy Spirit still comes to us, just as Jesus promised. Our experience of that gift might be noisy like a hurricane or bright like a flame. We might encounter that gift in

the company of a small community of disciples gathered in a home or in the voice of a stranger speaking our language.

Almost always, the Holy Spirit will come to us in and through the voices of people who have heard about the deeds of God in a language different from our own. Listening to those voices is how the church celebrated its birth and it is how we will continue spreading the Good News.

AMEN