

Pentecost is here! I love Pentecost. The book of Acts is dramatic... “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...”

The book of Acts is called Acts of the Apostles, perhaps it should be called Acts of the Spirit... because that’s exactly what’s going on. The Spirit is out front pulling them along, and the disciples are almost breathless, trying to sort it all out, doing what they can to understand.

The Holy Spirit comes, and the first thing that happens is that the language barrier is removed—it’s Gone! There is a great leveling of communication between all the people.

The writer of Acts goes out of his way to specify many different languages, just listen to this list again.... “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.”

We’re not talking about just a few languages here; this is an exhaustive list and pretty much all the languages surrounding their location. In effect, the writer of

Acts is using an exclamation mark! In other words--- pay attention! There are many languages! A great leveling is happening!

The text goes on to say, “All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

That’s our question for today. What is the meaning of this leveling of communication? The Holy Spirit comes and the first thing to happen is that the language barrier is obliterated.

Language is deeply personal and cultural. Language is often fraught with fear and suspicion, as well as with notions of cultural separateness and superiority.

Quick story... Kris and I had some guests from a foreign country visit our farm many years ago. Their primary language was Spanish, and they also spoke English. I had taken Spanish in college; I could catch a little of what they were talking about.

One evening we were gathered around a bon fire. One of the guys brought his guitar along so I grabbed mine and played along with him. I followed along as he played some Beatles songs, it was fun.

At one point in the conversation the guy playing guitar, looked at the others, and in Spanish, he said that I played guitar like a... He used a word I didn't recognize, but I suspected it was not good. Because, suddenly there was laughter and they were glancing at me. I was fearful he had insulted me. I pretended I didn't understand. I was really uncomfortable; it did not feel good to suspect I was the butt of a joke.

When we're with a group of people who speak a language we don't understand, aren't we always a little worried they're talking about us? We have a lot of fear about communication we don't understand. We get anxious.

In Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes, and suddenly people from different languages hear and understand one another. Isn't that amazing? Fear is transformed into wonder; good communication and deep understanding facilitates God's redemptive work in the world.

Language is also deeply cultural; it defines who we are. Language is what we use to tell our common story; the story of who we are as a community, what we have been through, what our values are... In other words, language gives us an identity.

Unfortunately, sometimes our identity is derived at the expense of others.

Sometimes, we believe we're the chosen ones. And our human tendency is to be

suspicious of people who are not a part of our group. We're tempted to think that somehow, we're better than them...

In Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes on the scene, and language is suddenly understood across cultures. That's huge! Suddenly, it's not about us and them, it's about us and us. This is a complete shift in how we see our own culture and particularly in relationship with other cultures. Do you see the leveling that is taking place? The God that is revealed by Jesus and the Spirit of Truth is a God who loves everyone in this world; not just us.

When I was at St Olaf, we had a group of Sudanese, from the Nuer tribe that worshiped in our chapel on Sunday afternoons. I would attend once in a while. The first time I went it was an eye opener. I entered the chapel, picked up one of their worship books, sat in the back pew and listened carefully. There were men on one side, women and children on the other...

There were lots of young families and children. The worship service was in Nuer, their language, but it was fascinating to realize, that even though I didn't understand any of the words, the pattern of worship was the same.

I knew what was being said. I knew the scripture lessons they were reading, and I could imagine what Simon was preaching. At one-point Gatloc, the worship leader announced a hymn and as everyone was standing up, I tried to look over the

shoulder of the person in front of me so I could see what page we were on. Gatloc noticed me, giggled, and said, "I'm sorry Todd, hymn number 121."

We went on to sing... They were singing with heart and conviction, and the song was, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*. I knew the melody, and I did my best to phonetically pronounce the words. I was mildly surprised that I could follow along; it was a wonderful feeling.

At the end of the service Simon invited me to come up to the front and give the final blessing. Earlier, Simon had taught me a few words of greeting. And so, I said "Male ke cay daar," the greeting for good afternoon, and they all just burst out with laughter and joy, it was great.

After the service, they all came forward, lots of smiles, handshakes and pats on the back. Even though I didn't understand a single word during the service, I was deeply moved by the Spirit. I was deeply touched by their welcome and their love. It was as if the language barrier was gone, and I knew in my heart these were my people. It was not us and them; it was us and us...

Sometimes, even when we speak the same language, it's as if we're speaking two different languages. There is a language of fear, accusation and division, and the good news this morning is that there is another language. The spirit speaks a

language of truth and that truth is that God loves us... The Spirit gives us a language of love, forgiveness and connection.

We might be tempted to believe that the truthful and righteous thing is to point our fingers at each other. And yet this is exactly the venomous language that Jesus died to. Religious people pointed their fingers at Jesus and blamed him for all their insecurities.

They were speaking a language of fear and violence. They fabricated all kinds of false charges, and carried him off to be crucified. And yet, Jesus, in the midst of all this violence, forgave them. He spoke a completely different language... Can you see the difference?

The language of God is about forgiveness, love and connection. The language of God is about mercy and reconciliation. The language of God is about justice, kindness and patience. It is a language that takes away our fear, and opens us up to reach out and to love our neighbor.

For me, Pentecost is about hearing the language of God; hearing about God's love in whatever context we might find ourselves. And asking, what does this mean? How can we speak this language of love? How can we reflect God's love?

So today, this week... in our opportunities for fellowship I invite you to speak God's language of love to one another. Say kind things; listen and love each other. Forgive and reconcile... Perhaps we can experience a kind of Pentecost; speaking a language of love and trust.

After all, God is guiding our church; we might feel a little like the disciples, not fully understanding what's going on, perhaps a little anxious, but make no doubt about it, God is in front of us pulling us into a wonderful future, we are a congregation of loving kind and gracious people, the language of love is an language we know very well, and it's all God's work through our words.

Amen...