

Pentecost A  
Acts 2:1-12  
May 28, 2023

*Parlez-vous Français?*  
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*When the day of Pentecost had come, [Jesus' followers] were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

*<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language...about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"*

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How many among us this morning speaks at least a few words of a language other than English? Let's see a show of hands. Okay, quite a few – that's great! Well, there was a time in my life, not so long ago, when I really wanted to be able to do just that – to speak...French.

You see, I was going on a mission trip to Paris. Our work would take us to the outskirts of the city where several million Muslims live in the giant towers of dilapidated government-administered slums.

I had had four years of high school French and one or two college courses, but I knew that I would need more than that to *really minister* to the people I would encounter on my trip. I prayed. After all, the spirit enabled the people of the Pentecost story to speak in other languages. Why not me? “Give me the gift of tongues,” I prayed.

Would you believe it if I told you it worked? Well, it didn't! At least not the way I had hoped. You see, I still couldn't remember the difference between the words for a piece of paper and a strand of pasta, but that didn't really impede what we did. Most of our time was spent building relationships with children in the slums: playing games, singing simple songs, doing art, serving treats, and making balloon animals – something I still love to do! These were all languages – languages that spoke directly to the people we most wanted to relate to and it was almost entirely non-verbal...the gift of tongues.

Let's take another look at that passage from Acts. We read that a large group of Jesus' followers were gathered together in one place on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival also known as Shavuot to mark the giving of the Torah, when suddenly there came a violent wind that filled the house and tongues of fire hovered over all their heads. Immediately they were able to speak in new tongues and they went out into the city to share Jesus' message in the languages people understood.

Here's where I think *we* connect to the story – in this text we don't just read about a bunch of people who suddenly started talking to one another in languages that nobody understood, we read about a

bunch of people who suddenly started talking to others in the languages *they* understood – languages they could relate to. Recognizing spirit among us is about identifying the various languages we can speak that others understand and relate to – languages that minister directly to another’s need. I believe the gift of tongues we read about in Acts is the ability to speak in languages that minister, both verbal and non-verbal.

Now, I know that as soon as I say the word “minister” or “ministry” certain images arise – perhaps of a dour looking fellow dressed in a black robe or a saintly woman in white with a flowing stole. We may think of preaching a sermon or baptizing a baby or saying a prayer or feeding a multitude, but, in truth, ministry is quite simply attending to the needs of another and all of us are called and equipped for this work – to be ministers to one another in the world.

In an anonymous quotation spuriously attributed the Reformer Martin Luther, a wise person once said this about ministry:

*“The one who sweeps the kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays; not because they might sing a Christian hymn as they sweep, but because God loves clean floors. The shoe cobbler does their Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes because God is interested in good craftsmanship.”*

The author isn’t really trying to make a point about cleaning or cobbler-ing, but what they are saying is that ministry is about doing what we do well and doing it for the sake of others. In Acts we read about people, filled with spirit, speaking the language of their hearers. What are the languages that our community and our world understand? What languages can you speak?

Though it might seem obvious, it's worth saying that not everyone speaks the same language. I'm reminded of a Sufi tale that I think helps illuminate this simple point. Three travelers were journeying through the desert together. Between them they had only one gold coin. "What should we buy?" they wondered. "I know what we should buy," said one. "Let us purchase *üzüm*." "Oh no," replied another, "we really must buy *Aṅgūra*." "I'm sorry," disagreed the third, "but we absolutely must spend our durhum to pay for *anäb*."

While the three travelers quarreled, a sage approached them. "Might I be of any help?" he asked. "Well," they responded, "We have but one gold durham and we cannot agree on what should be bought with it: *üzüm*, *Aṅgūra*, or *anäb*." The sage replied, "I will tell you how to purchase all three with your one gold coin, but for my payment I wish to hit each of you 12 times on the head with my shoe." And while it was an unusual price, the three agreed. The sage took off his shoe and exacted his payment on their pates then said, "While you argue about what to buy with your gold – *üzüm*, *Aṅgūra*, or *anäb* – you disagree without need, for they are different words, but one and the same meaning. Go and buy your grapes."<sup>1</sup>

The gift of tongues that we read about in Acts is the ability to speak in the languages others understand and relate to – the languages that minister to them. Like the three travelers, we've probably experienced firsthand the frustrating fact that not everyone speaks or understands the same language, but that is precisely why we all have different ways of ministering – why we all speak different languages of ministry.

The crux of the sermon this morning is this; recognizing spirit within each of us is about identifying the various languages we can speak that others can understand – the languages that minister.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a story included in the *Masnawi* by Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī.

That's what was special about the Christian community of the Pentecost story. That's what is special about this community of faith. And that is one of the things that is special about each of us – we can all speak the language of ministry.

What specific languages of ministry do you speak and who needs to hear those words, spoken and lived? May we lift up your voices. Amen.