

“In Our Own Languages”
Acts 2:1-21
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

PRAYER: Come, Holy Spirit. Fall afresh on me. Come, Holy Spirit. Fall afresh on us this day. Holy God, we praise you and give you thanks for your grace and for your salvation, which we know through your Son, Jesus Christ. By your Spirit, you created the world; with your Spirit, you baptized your Son; in your Spirit, we live and move and have our being as those who have turned into the ways that lead to eternal life. Guide us in our worship of you today. Open our hearts and minds to hear what you would have us hear. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.

Many of you know that before I became a pastor, I worked for the federal government. My job gave me several opportunities to travel to Europe where I was a “stranger in a strange land.” Like many of the people from across the Roman world who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, I did not know the local language.

- I knew a little German from high school and college so in Germany, I got by.
- I learned a few French words, enough to stay out of trouble, but I was grateful to find menus in English when I went to lunch and dinner.
- Perhaps the most trouble I had with the local lingo was—surprise—in the United Kingdom. It’s been said the United States and the UK are “two nations separated by a common language,” and it’s true. I mean, what can you say about a country where a truck is a lorry, an elevator a lift; you check your car’s engine by opening the bonnet and put your luggage in the boot; when you’re cold you wear a jumper, not a sweater; and when you order biscuits you get cookies instead. Well, that part’s not so bad.

Actually, you can find a lot of people who speak English in most of the big cities and tourist areas in Europe; and, in many countries, English is taught as a second language.

But go too far from the beaten path and it can be another story.

Like the one about an American tourist in Germany:

The tourist had no knowledge of German whatsoever and had wandered off the tourist trail and found himself in a small village where he was having trouble making himself understood. He was about to panic when he was caught in a sneezing fit. A passerby smiled and nodded at him and said, “Gesundheit!” The American rushed after the man and declared, “O good, you speak English!”¹

When we travel to countries where we don’t speak their language, we can feel disconnected and disoriented. And the reason is obvious: we want to hear familiar sounds, the language of home. We want to understand and to be understood. We want connection.

From our scripture lesson for today, that’s just what the folks in Jerusalem for Pentecost found when they heard the disciples speaking in their own languages. That’s what made them stop, and listen, and wonder what it all meant. Of course, there were the naysayers, the cynics, the ones who wouldn’t know a miracle if it happened to them. “These people are filled with new wine!” Huh. If there was an alcoholic drink that enabled you speak in foreign languages, I would have started drinking years ago! But life doesn’t work that way, and that’s a good thing.

¹ “Spirit Poured Out, When the Spirit Moves,” Worship Planning for Sunday, May 23, 2021, Discipleship Ministries, article on internet, https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/when-the-spirit-moves/pentecost-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/pentecost-year-b-preaching-notes?mc_cid=029980da3b&mc_eid=b72d925b57, accessed 18 May 2021.

No, what those “tourists” from other lands heard in Jerusalem that day was God’s way of fulfilling the promises Jesus had made to his disciples before he ascended into heaven. Jesus promised they would:

- Receive power from the Holy Spirit
- Be witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria
- And they would witness to the ends of the earth.

On that Pentecost, the ends of the earth had come to Jerusalem in the form of Jewish pilgrims who came to celebrate Pentecost.

- Pentecost was originally a harvest festival in the Jewish faith.
- It is celebrated seven weeks and one day—that is, 50 days—after Passover.

On that Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit to be with them and to give them the ability to make connections with people in their own languages.

The Day of Pentecost that we celebrate today is often thought of as the birthday of the church and, in many ways, it is just that. Pentecost was:

- **A God-powered initiative.** Just as God initiates salvation for us through Jesus, God initiates the Church by pouring out the Spirit on God’s people.
- **A sign that God’s love is universal.** Jesus came first to the Jewish people preaching salvation through repentance and the forgiveness of sins. But then, the Spirit went to work, and everyone heard about Jesus in their own language. Clearly, God was not going to limit the opportunity for eternal life to one group of people. In the Book of Genesis, God confused the nations at the Tower of Babel, making them speak different languages so that overly proud human beings would not work together against God. Pentecost reversed this. Pentecost turned it around. Pentecost was God’s way of calling people together, of forging connections, of calling us together as one family. New life in Jesus Christ is open to everyone. This kind of news is too good to be kept to yourself.
- **A sign that God’s love is for all generations.** Peter made this clear in his sermon. He quoted the prophet Joel: “In the last days it will be...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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). God’s Spirit is poured out for all ages, races, genders, social status. The Spirit is for all because God is for all people.
- **A pointer to the future.** Christians believe this world is not the way God wants it to be. It’s not quite right because of sin, which broke our relationship with God. God sent Jesus to restore that relationship, and we broke Jesus on a cross. But God did not give up and raised Jesus from the grave, so that we might have eternal life through faith in Jesus. Jesus will come again, in God’s good time. Then there will be a “new heaven and a new earth” as God sets to rights everything that has gone wrong. Until then, the Holy Spirit guides us so that we can continue the restoring, redeeming work of God in the world. We see this work wherever there are acts of love, justice, and peace.

We know that there are languages in the world other than those that are spoken.

- We live in a very visual age—the Medieval period was another one—where computer-driven graphics and video content take the place of much written language. If a picture was worth a thousand words once, now it might be said to be worth a gigabyte of data.
- We know in certain subcultures, there are different forms of language. People who are deaf “speak” sign language.” People without sight “read” braille.
- We know about body language, and how posture and position can convey meaning and emotions, all without uttering a word.

- And we must not neglect to mention the language of love. Couples in love can communicate their mood with a look or a touch. This is intimate language shared among those who love one another deeply. God has a language of love that is spoken to the world. It was spoken to us in the person of Jesus Christ.
- The language of God’s love was spoken to us from the start: “In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...” (John 1:1-3).
- The language of God’s love unites Christians everywhere through the Holy Spirit. We are one Church. We worship one God. In the words of our Communion liturgy, the Spirit makes us “one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” The Spirit makes us one in love to one another, and to God.
- The language of God’s love is the language of our true home, our home with God in Jesus Christ. Every family has its own language, certain words or phrases that if you’re part of the family, and you hear the words, you know what they mean. Jesus commanded us to speak the language of God’s family with these words: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

As we celebrate Pentecost this year, let us practice the language of God’s love as the Spirit give us the ability to speak it. By word or by deed, witness to God’s love for others through acts of kindness, justice, and mercy. Be considerate, patient, bear with one another’s shortcomings. Smile! Remember the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel and if you have to, use words.”

You have learned God’s language of love through the mercy, forgiveness, and grace God has shown you. Go and do likewise. And you will speak the language of God, the words of love, the words of our true home in Jesus Christ.

Amen.