

SPEAKING A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

Acts 2.1-12

Pentecost, June 4, 2017

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Acts 2: 1-12

2When 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 people 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 converts to Judaism, 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?"

Have you ever been part of a group where the facilitator invites each of you to introduce yourself by telling people something they might not know about you?

I hate that.

People always end up being way more interesting and mysterious than I am.

For several years, the best I could do was to say that I was the 1974/75 Bible quiz champion for the state of Michigan. I've brought my trophy to prove it.

I stopped saying that because it turns out it wasn't all that surprising and because it made me sound even less interesting than I hoped to be.

What I started saying instead, and some of you have heard me say this, is that I once was shot at while driving a get-away car.

It's true.

But that's a story for another time – which, I trust, might make me a little more interesting and a little more mysterious.

The truth is, I know this Pentecost story and the chapters that follow like the back of my hand – or, at least, I did. Because those were the chapters of the Bible about which we were being quizzed when I won my trophy.

Sad to say, I discovered that there is a big difference between memorizing something and learning it. I memorized the answers for all the possible questions I could imagine about this text in Acts 2. But, in the process, I missed the most important one: “What does this mean?” That's the big question. That's the one the people in this story ask under the influence of the Spirit and the one we might ask this morning.

And I'm beginning to wonder if part of what it means is that the work of the Spirit is to energize a holy curiosity about the mystery of each other and the world and life itself. If there is something good about introducing yourself to a group by saying something people might not know about you, it is the opportunity to recognize in each other that we are more than we seem.

What would it mean for that kind of power – that holy curiosity - to be unleashed in us?

And what would it mean if the Spirit is at work anytime and anywhere that people are trying to communicate – both in how they speak and how they hear – across their cultures?

What if the spiritual life is not only multi-dimensional, as I said last week, but what if it is also multi-lingual? That is, not just learning to speak words but learning to hear, as the story says, in the context of someone's "*native* language" – to hear them in their own words and in their own stories.

Think of it. The story of our earliest Christian ancestors isn't about teaching everyone to speak the same holy language. They don't all miraculously start speaking Latin or Greek or even Hebrew. The power of the Spirit was to speak and to hear the mystery of God at work in other people's lives and languages.

And maybe part of that mystery was that, as they did so, they discovered they were hearing their own stories being told in the stories of another.

The truth is, I learned a lot more English in my high school Spanish class than I ever did in most of my English classes. I took my own language for granted. I hadn't learned its structure or its relationships until I had to see it in the light of someone else's language.

The truth is, I learn more about my Christian faith listening to Rabbi Olivier talk about Judaism than I do from some of the Christians I know.

The truth is, I learn more about what it means to be white in America by listening to the stories of black folk than I do from listening to the stories of people who look like and talk like me.

The truth is, I will learn more about what it means to be an American standing with our Muslim sisters and brothers next Saturday than I would by simply reciting the pledge of allegiance in a room full of people just like me.

And what else can we do? Because I am thinking this morning about 53-year-old Ricky John Best, 23-year-old Taliesin Myrddin Namkai Meche, and 21-year-old Micah David-Cole Fletcher. Best and Namkai Meche were stabbed to death and Fletcher was wounded last Friday standing up to the kind of language we have come to call “hate speech” aimed at a Muslim woman on a Portland train.

The mere fact that we have identified a language called “hate speech” should be a warning to us.

Namkai Meche’s sister wrote:

We lost him in a senseless act that brought close to home the insidious rift of prejudice and intolerance that is too familiar, too common. He was resolute in his conduct (and) respect of all people. In his final act of bravery, he held true to what he believed is the way forward. He will live in our hearts forever as the just, brave, loving, hilarious and beautiful soul he was. We ask that in honor of his memory, we use this tragedy as an opportunity for reflection and change. We choose love.

If we are feeling some kind of urgency today to find ways to communicate with those in cultures and speaking languages different from our own, that should not surprise us.

That urgency isn't just from the situation of the world in which we live in right now. It's in our DNA. It's Pentecost. It is the seminal work of the Spirit that called the Church into existence and energizes our solidarity with, and holy curiosity about, the language and the lives and the stories of others.

But I have noticed something. And maybe you have noticed it too.

If the Spirit is at work whenever and wherever people are trying to communicate across cultures, it's all the more difficult for that to happen when people think they are speaking the same language.

Sometimes, when I hear people speaking "Christian," it sounds like a foreign language to me. I recognize the words. But I don't get what they are saying. Or I do get it and I shut down because I don't want to be hurt or shamed or just plain angry about the way they are speaking and hearing.

One of the last books the great Marcus Borg wrote before he died was *Speaking Christian*. Maybe he wrote it because so many of the people who "speak Christian" think they know what they are talking about. Maybe they take their language for granted because they haven't learned how to hear and speak in the language of others. Maybe they have memorized answers but they have forgotten to ask the big question: "What does this mean?" Maybe they have twisted its meaning into some kind of sacred "hate speech."

Borg says, "... even for many Christians the language of the Bible and Christianity is like a foreign language." But ...

Christian language, (he says) ... points to an alternative vision and way of life centered in God and God's passion for a different kind of world. It has power. For many it has been and continues to be a sacrament of the sacred, a means of grace, a way the Spirit of God speaks to us, a vehicle whereby our lives are changed. But how we understand this language – how we hear and speak it - matters.

Namkai Meche's sister, even in the face of her brother's murder, is telling her own story about the beauty of her brother's soul and she is communicating it in the language of love and is asking us to join her.

What would *that* mean for us?

That's the Pentecost question this morning: "What does this mean?" And how is the Spirit at work in us to communicate – to speak and to hear – across cultures so that we can discover our own stories in the stories of others.

Pentecost is a prayer we pray, this morning, that Ricky John Best and Taliesin Myrddin Namkai Meche will not have died in vain because we are opening ourselves to a Spirit that is stirring us up to live and act and speak in that tongue which every land by grace shall understand.

And today, if you hear that voice – if you feel the Spirit stirring up that prayer in you – well, for God's sake and the world's and your own, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

"'Final act of bravery': Men who were fatally stabbed trying to stop anti-Muslim rants identified."
www.washingtonpost.com; May 27, 2017. Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian* (HarperOne, 2011), pp. 9 & 19-20.