

Pentecost

Salem United Methodist Church

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Scripture is doesn't exist in isolation. This really hit me this week. It's amazing how ancient texts can speak a new word just by being read in a new time and place. We discover this all the time in Bible study, so I shouldn't have been surprised.

The spirit showed up in my reading this week and it blew me away. I can't tell you how many times I've read this passage. But today, all I can see is how much God loves diversity.

Today, I'm preaching at two different churches. Here, in English, and later, at Christ Deaf Church, in American Sign Language. As I looked at the Acts 2 text, it struck me that each context would need a radically different sermon to be appropriate to the language and culture. Both are about Pentecost, both are about the Holy Spirit's work in the world... but preaching the same sermon at both places is not faithful to your needs or theirs.

And that is so **incredibly** cool.

I knew God must love diversity. I mean, look at our world. Look at the variety of trees just in this clearing. Look at the birds. Look at the food we have access to. Not to even begin on different humans. So, clearly, God loves diversity. God didn't have to allow so much difference to evolve. But I believe that God placed the potential for genes to change *right into* the first cells.

And still. I didn't really see God's love for diversity until reading this week.

Ready for this? Let's say God is all powerful. I believe that. If you don't, suspend your disbelief for a few minutes please!

So, God is all powerful. God sends Godself as the Holy Spirit to the disciples. When the

Spirit gets there it looks like flames of fire on their heads (which is already pretty intense!) but then they begin proclaiming Jesus' good works in languages they have never heard before.

...what?

Friends. This isn't the Star Trek universal translator. This isn't learning a few phrases so you can order at your favorite restaurant. This is fluent proclamation!

The Spirit could have done anything. Right? We've said God is all powerful. The Spirit could have implanted the stories into people's heads. The Spirit could have created a universal language that they all suddenly learned. The Spirit could have send angels to translate. The spirit could have made connection easy by erasing all differences right away.

But that's not what happened.

They learn the languages of people they haven't even met yet and have no reason to love. And, let me tell you, using another language can be a labor, or it can be a labor of love. For me, it tends to oscillate!

Some how they are sharing their first-person experience, their testimony, in the native tongue of their listeners.

What a difference that makes.

Imagine being one of those ancient travelers. Pentecost is not originally a Christian holiday. It's originally a Jewish holiday commemorating the day God gave them the law at Mount Sinai. Why are the travelers there? It was one of the three "Pilgrimage Festivals." So, people traveled for it.

I don't know if everyone traveled every year or if it was a once per lifetime trip. This year, at least, it was incredibly diverse. If you look at the scripture, you'll see a super long list of places. This is one of those weird Bible moments that most of us either get stuck on or skip over. When I see a list of places or names, 95% of the time I skip it. Why does the Bible do this? Don't they know its hard to read?

Well, this is a writing convention telling us to slow down. When the Bible goes into excruciating detail or list after list, it's the writers trying to show you significance. Paper and writing space were at a premium. They didn't waste words on things that didn't matter. The writer didn't want us to miss the *incredible diversity*, so instead of saying, "a TON of countries," they said, "this, and this, and this, and this" until our heads are spinning with names and peoples.

So, all those people, they're in town to celebrate a religious holiday. We don't know if they have family in town, friends, just a tent. We don't know if they speak Aramaic, like Jesus, or Greek, or only their home town language.

Suddenly, they hear their native language. Wouldn't you congregate to your language if you didn't hear it anywhere else?

And, my friends, it wasn't just people trying to learn your language. It was people speaking with passion and conviction. It was people who weren't halting, but who were desperate to share a life-giving word about an impossibly resurrected King.

Can you imagine what that must have felt like?

It says they were “amazed and perplexed.” (I mean, duh.) People don’t learn languages overnight. Most people don’t even want to! Maybe enough for religious or market transactions. Not at the level where you understand the jokes, the poetry, the nuance.

But that’s what the spirit choses to give them.

This appearance of the spirit isn’t about healing or providing food. This is about caring for our differences.

Here, in Jerusalem, their differences are not erased. They keep their cultures and languages. The holy spirit gives them a tool to love each other **through** their roots rather than in spite of them.

As an American, this is something I think about a lot. Our country has been lifted up as a melting pot where differences, origins, disappear as we become *American*. My great grandparents were German. They didn’t speak German with their kids because they wanted them to be American. They even changed their last name to something more pronounceable. We only know that from my grandfather scouring immigration sign in records from Ellis Island. When WW2 was going on, it was safer to be *as American as possible*. An entire language, an entire culture, erased from my family. We kept a few recipes, but the only thing German about me is my DNA.

Many of our families did the same kind of thing. We jumped into the melting pot with both feet, for better or worse.

As I read this text, I think about my ancestors, here only knowing German and needing to fit in. I think about myself in Deaf Ministries, struggling to understand

and be understood. I think about second and third language learners here in our country. I think about the Deaf church members who are born here and yet 90% of them are born into families that never learn sign language.

In these situations, **where *having or not having language*** is front and center all the time, suddenly encountering your own language... its indescribable.

Perhaps some of you are listening to me speak English and it's your second language. Perhaps you've spent significant time in another country.

I know you know what I'm talking about.

What's it like when you hear your first language? I bet even in a crowd it ***lights up*** your brain. Sometimes I catch someone's hands moving in the corner of my eye and my head whips around to see if its language or just gesture.

There is *nothing* like speaking or signing directly with someone **in their first language**.

Don't misunderstand me. Interpreting and translating are vital skills. They make our world easier to navigate. They provide accessibility to needed services. Making sure interpreting was accessible and of good quality was a huge part of my job in Deaf Ministries. I am definitely Team "Do Whatever it Takes for More Language Accessibility."

However. *I can't even translate **my own thoughts*** from English to American Sign Language or vice versa without losing something in the translation.

Have you ever read poetry that's been translated into English with a native speaker looking over your shoulder? Perhaps they watched excitedly for you to see and appreciate the beauty of the phrasing. However, almost inevitably, you'll see their

face fall. Not because the translation is bad, but because it's missing some of the beauty. The phrases lose their harmony and become just... *words*.

And so, the Spirit gives them a connection filled with beauty. The Spirit shared identity, native-ness, poetry.

This is incredible. This is diversity celebrated in ways I just don't see in our world today. Not in a melting pot place. I mean, we have cultural days. We have black history month. We have women's history month. Yes, yes. But this, this is something different.

This is taking our differences and **highlighting** them to celebrate. This is taking their biggest differences, the ones that would keep them apart, and teaching the disciples the *nuance* of it. This isn't translating the Good News. It's *becoming* the Good News!

Gosh, it sounds good, doesn't it?

But... how often does the Holy Spirit teach us languages in a finger snap?

Not everyone will be sent to a cross cultural setting where they need to learn a language.

(If that's not you, keep listening.)

Well, in our melting pot world we may mostly speak the same language, but I don't know that we're always understanding each other.

In college, I worked at camp Manidokan. One week of the summer, we had a group called, "Camp Life." This was all inner-city Baltimore kids who had experienced violence. It's not hard to be a city kid and qualify for this camp!

Let me tell you. These kids and I spoke a different language. It wasn't quite like learning a different language, but it definitely required some of the same emotional skills. Over the 4 years I worked with the camp they went from my biggest challenge, to being my *biggest challenge that I loved*.

I'll never forget when I realized that I couldn't just teach them my language.

There was a particular camper who refused to use the porta pot. If you've ever been to Manidokan, you know there are places on the campus where the nearest bathroom was a porta pot. That was it. There wasn't another option.

[finish the story-include my cajoling, her fear, Carissa's careful question, her mom's rationale for the rules.]

I **assumed** my language, my culture, my expectations about the world were *universally good*. I thought learning my language of camp culture would be beneficial for her.

And, in many cases, that's true. Kids get exposure to things at camp they'd never experience otherwise and its good.

And she *was* exposed to awesome experiences that week! Like seeing her first a deer, hearing bugs at night, working on learning to swim. She learned a lot of my language that week.

But the porta pot? Her fear was intense and *rational*. It wasn't right for me to try to ignore the source in order to teach a new behavior. Language learning is best when its reciprocal. It was my turn to learn from her. In her world, porta pots were, and are, life and death. Needles are nothing to play around with. Trusting a suburban camp counselor in a rural setting to rewrite her language of surviving in the city?

Dangerous. I had no clue. How could I? I assumed we lived in a melting pot where we could all be the same.

But we're not. And that's on purpose. If God can do anything, God could have made us the same. And yet, when the Spirit falls on Pentecost, she **intensifies** our differences and gives us the tools to *love them*.

Later today, I'm going to Christ Deaf Church where I'll preach a sermon in American Sign Language. You're all welcome to come. I plan to post it on our social media, as well. I'll go preach in their native language. There will be interpreters for the "signing impaired."

They spent 4 years teaching me, bearing with my errors, and loving me. Now, I can love them by bringing the word of God as natively as I can. And, friends, I'll be preaching a different sermon. Different languages and cultures demand different sermons. If I translated this... well, it would be like those poems that just fall flat.

And... who knows if I would have seen this, this love of diversity, without that context?

I wonder... What languages do you know?

If you could ask the spirit to truly teach you any language, any culture, any experience, what would it be?

I suggest starting with the real people around you-either that you know personally, or who you hear about.

Who is an enigma in your life? Which groups baffle you? Who speaks a language you don't know? Who behaves in ways you don't understand? What groups talk about things that absolutely perplex you?

Perhaps if the Holy Spirit rained down right now, that would be the language you would learn. Not to conform to it, but to try to understand it from the inside. Learn the fears, hopes, loves.

Let me tell you, learning another language and culture is **humbling**. My time in Deaf ministry was the hardest, most humbling, and yet important 4 years of my life thus far.

I think you should do it. Take the prayer time to fill out your prayer cards if you haven't but also to meditate on what languages you may need to learn. As you meditate, ask the Holy Spirit to rain down on you with a spirit of diversity, or motivation, or whatever you think you'll need for this journey. When you get home, I suggest starting with googling things. Ask questions, read blogs. Perhaps there's someone you know who can help you learn the insider feelings. Maybe a memoir you can read.

Remember, all of these are just starting points. This Spirit fall? It's all about people. Not just concepts or ideas. Its about getting to know people for who they are in all their poetry, fears, and experiences.

We may live in a melting pot, but God created us for diversity, so let's learn to truly love it.

Amen.