

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east,* they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ ⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the Lord said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Second Scripture Acts 2: 1-21

When 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.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews 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 proselytes, 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?’ ¹³But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “In the last days it will be, God declares,
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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above

and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Sermon: Understanding

In the story of the tower of Babel, the diversity of human languages is a kind of curse from God. It's a way for God to put limits on human power, by dispersing and dividing the species. If that's the case, it worked. It's hard for humanity to work out its problems, to provide for itself and manage natural resources, when very often we do not understand one another.

Our other languages this morning included one native speaker and two speaking languages they learned as an adult. In the 11 am service, Gazela will be a second native speaker—did you know that they speak French, as well as Malagasy, in Madagascar? In fact, my kids' first language was Turkish, but then it went dormant after about age 4, so Ahmet's Turkish is kind of in an in-between category—neither native speaker nor second language learner.

I seize on the opportunities in Pentecost and in World Communion Sunday, for us to hear other languages in worship, I'm sure partly because I'm fascinated with languages and would like to learn about four more of them, if it weren't such an arduous process. But I also think it's important for us to worship even just a little bit in other languages from time to time, for a lot of reasons. It's important for us to remember that there are people following Jesus all over the world, in their own time zones, cultures, and languages. Yes, there are people in the UK who regularly say the Lord's Prayer in Welsh and people in South Africa who say it in Xhosa. Hearing it in other languages reminds us that the Lord's Prayer wasn't written in English, not even in King James English. It's a foreign language in itself, for all of us.

And it's also important for us to remember that here in the United States *we* come together from a variety of backgrounds and heritages and experiences; that we are not all the same and in many ways we do not all speak the same language, and that's ok. We can still communicate with each other and worship together. So while on the one hand, I would love to have four different native speakers up here speaking their own native language, on the other hand, the second language speakers remind us that we sometimes have to learn how to make ourselves understood, and that sometimes that's a challenge and a learning curve. I hope when you hear my kids speaking learned languages this morning, it reminds you of all the people who have had to work to learn English—including Heijung and the Randrasanas, as well as the previous generation of the Kobayashi family.

Pentecost is sometimes considered the birthday of the church. Though there are a lot of candidates for what would be considered the church's birthday, including Christmas and Easter. But Pentecost is the day that the church began to speak in other languages. And maybe that ability is what makes it a church, not just a collection of Jesus' friends and fans, a group of people who remember his powerful words and his healing power. Pentecost is the day when we begin to tell that story with the goal of introducing others to its saving power and

hope. On Pentecost we begin to try and speak to the world around us in ways that can be fully understood.

We're not always good at that, and that makes sense, because it is a very challenging task. When I taught introduction to the Bible in undergraduate classes I would tell my students, when you write an academic paper on a biblical text, what makes it academic is that you are writing to and for people who do not believe what you believe. So in a college class you cannot refer to God's grace as though everyone knows what that is, for example. That's very tricky for students who grew up in the church—the only way they have ever talked about the Bible was with others who very much did believe what they believe. But I'm only now coming to understand that speaking about the faith to people who don't believe what we believe is at least a very good exercise, and at most our best survival as a church and maybe as a species.

Now that we are where we are as a nation, it's become increasingly important in our daily conversations, for our relationships with one another, for our civil discourse and for our communication as a church with the community and the world that surrounds us. The question of our era seems to be, how do we talk to people who do not believe what we believe? How do we find some kind of common language?

As speakers of English, we have a history of assuming that where there's a language barrier, other people will learn our language. Americans can be downright offended if people in Cancun or Bangkok don't speak English. The church has had this problem too. We speak church. We say things like Jesus loves you or God is love, and expect people to hear the truth in those statements. We sing the doxology and expect the world to be able to sing along. But many people out there do not know the tune. They have no clue what we are talking about. They hear churchy nonsense, in the same way that when I hear Chinese or Arabic or Urdu, I hear only sounds, not words. In our context, many people do not speak church. They need subtitles.

Which reminds me of that hilarious scene in the movie *Airplane!* that some of you may remember. Two African American passengers are talking to each other using an exaggerated version of the black urban slang of 1980, when the film was made. A white flight attendant is having trouble understanding these guys and then one very white, older female passenger intervenes—I just discovered that it's the actress who played the Beaver's mom on *Leave It To Beaver*--saying confidently, "I speak jive." One of the black guys gets offended and Mrs. Cleaver walks away in a huff, still slinging slang, "Chump don't want the help; chump don't get the help."

There's a fine line between speaking so as to be understood and talking down, patronizing, assuming that your audience can't make the code switch themselves, can't come to you.

When you are learning the language, especially in the country where that's the dominant language, it can be terrifying when people speak to you as though you are fluent, leaving you in the dust of their native speaker vocabulary. On the other hand, it's insulting when people speak to you slowly or loudly or assume that their minimal English is better than your passable Spanish or Turkish or whatever. Communicating well, connecting with other people, isn't always about shared words; it's also about mutual respect and attention.

As the church, we don't so much need to teach people to speak church. We need to learn to speak so that we can be understood, and that means being sensitive to what people have learned, good or bad, of the Christian faith. There are few people on this planet who have no preconceived notions about the Bible or Jesus or the church. Everyone has heard of us; sometimes that's the problem. For the abused woman who was told that she only needed to be more obedient to her husband, the Bible has been a source of suffering. For the gay man who was taught to see himself as an abomination, the church has been a painful place. When we try to make ourselves understood; we need to go carefully or we will bump into bruises and thus hurt those we are trying to embrace.

Sometimes making ourselves understood won't happen in words, but in actions. We can talk all day about God's love, or we can feed hungry people, work to get people affordable housing, hand out school supplies to children, and thus make sure our neighbors feel a little of God's love. Then maybe we can talk about it.

The story of the tower of Babel is about human pride, about hubris, our apparently irrepressible sense that we can master the universe and stand in the place of God. That doesn't mean that God wants us divided forever. In Pentecost, God rejoices in the miracle of human understanding, the crossing of language and cultural barriers so as to unite in praise of God. Maybe our languages and cultures will remain barriers until we find something that isn't human pride to unite around. Maybe we can learn to understand and be understood if understanding itself is our goal is more a goal and less a means to an end.