

How Can This Be? (Pentecost)
Acts 2:1-12, Romans 10:8-15
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Pastor Dave Carver

When we read Acts 2 in our day and age, it seems quaint, doesn't it? I mean, while very few of us actually have fluency in another tongue, we are well acquainted with the fact that people use other languages all the time. Who hasn't heard that chipper voice on the other end of the phone say, "To continue in English, press one; para Español, o prima dos"?

We know that language matters. Again, we see evidence of shoddy translations all the time. For instance, check out these signs from around the world:



As the Captain of Road Prison #36 might say, "What we've got here... is a failure to communicate."

Words are not the only way to communicate, but they are surely among the best, and the most tried and true means of conveying information and intent.



And Acts chapter two is about words, in a manner of speaking. As we read those words with our twenty-first century minds, we are fascinated with the linguistics of the situation on several levels.

First of all, this is the Sunday of the year when you are least likely to volunteer to be the lay reader, because you're afraid that I'll stick you with that nasty string of names:

"Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? ***Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?***

Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" I know that those are words none of you want to read out loud in public.

And once we get past pronouncing those words, we tend to fall in love with the idea of all those different people speaking in all of those different languages. Have you ever been a part of a Pentecost service of worship where the congregation embraces different languages? Someone will read a verse in, say, Spanish or French, and then usually the pastor will trot out his or her Greek; depending on how resourceful and connected we are, maybe the church will hear some Swahili or Chichewa or Arabic or Mandarin... We love services like that. We are, sometimes, overly impressed with ourselves; we think about how gifted and creative and well-traveled we are; we admire those who can speak other languages and

secretly wish that we'd have had the chance to travel a little bit more.

Have you seen services like that? Do you know what I mean?

Listen: none of that happened at the Pentecost about which we read this morning. That is to say, there is no record of the disciples pouring out into the streets and starting to preach, only to have Andrew go over to Matthew and say, "Dude, you speak Amharic? That is so cool!" We don't see John interrupting his sermon by saying to James, "Since when did you speak Farsi? Give me a break, man!"

Notice this: there is no record of the disciples ever being impressed with their own ability to communicate in another language. Who is impressed? Those who cannot only hear, but who can understand the message.

Think for a moment about what it means to be able to hear something in your own language in a place where you do not expect it at all. I don't know if you've every been in a place where you are the minority, linguistically speaking, but try to either recall from your own experience or imagine from something you've seen... What happens when you hear someone speaking your own language?

Years ago, several of us were privileged to visit a small congregation comprised of Seneca People at the Allegany

Reservation near Salamanca, New York. We stayed with these Native American people, worked with Bible School, did a little painting, and so on. One night we met some of the tribal elders. Can I tell you how heartbreaking it was to hear these men and women weep as they remembered how the earliest leaders of their church – white missionaries – would beat them as children if they were caught speaking in their native Seneca tongue. “We were taught that our language was dirty,” they recalled. “We were forced to learn only the language of the whites.” Some of them remembered being unable to communicate with their grandparents as a result of this. Language matters.

I had a friend who died a horrible death as a result of Lou Gehrig’s Disease. As she lost her ability to control her muscles, she was increasingly imprisoned in her own body, and when she died I was one of two people in the world to whom she could express her thoughts. On many occasions I got calls to go to the nursing home in the middle of the night because there was something clearly wrong, but nobody could understand her. Language matters.

My neighbor Jessalyn and I were visiting in her back yard and I noticed a man standing in the middle of the street, not moving at all. He looked odd, and out of place. I called to him to see if he needed help or would like a cold drink and in a heavily accented voice he explained, “No, no, no thank you. Three months ago I have moved to your country from Ghana in Africa. Everything is so different here. But I found that if I come to this place, I can hear chickens, and that is the only sound that is anything like the sounds of home. So when I miss my wife and my daughters I like to come here to listen to the chickens. Is that all right? I am lonely, and the chickens, well, they help.”

Do you see? When you hear something in your own language, it means that who you are and who you have grown to be – that it’s understood. It means that I don’t have

to translate myself or try to figure out what you really mean – I am understood. When you speak to me in my own language, it means that you know me. You accept me. You validate me. My stories are worth something.



¹When the visitors to Jerusalem heard the followers of Jesus speaking in all those different languages, they couldn't believe their ears. "How can this be?" they wondered. "Does this involve me? Am I included?"

You see, usually when I hear people speaking in another language, I automatically assume that it doesn't involve me. I am excluded. I am not involved. And therefore, whatever they say does not matter to me.

Conversely, when you speak to me in words that I understand, you invite me to a greater level of relationship and maybe even embrace. When you take the time to learn my language, you welcome me and say that my stories matter to you, and you'd like to hear them. When you adapt your ears and your lips to my speech and my hearing, you show something of Christ to me in your welcome and affirmation.

So this week, I sat and I listened to the thousands of voices wondering, "How can this be?". I thought about all of those communities that were blessed because followers of Jesus were open to the idea and practice of speaking another language, of engaging a different culture, of being open to those with different experiences. And I wondered what that meant to us today. What languages surround this community? And are we open to learning them?

¹ Pentecost: True Spiritual Unity and Fellowship in The Holy Spirit, by Rebecca Brogan (used by permission, more at <http://jtbarts.com>)

A number of people who walk up and down that street every day connect with a culture that might be summarized by the phrase “Black Lives Matter”. Some are actually connected with the BLM activist movement that has a network and a membership and a webpage, while others are more interested in not only pointing out that there is a disparity in the apparent worth of human life and that disparity correlates to the tone of one’s skin, but in changing that reality.

Others who share that sidewalk throw up their hands and say, “Seriously? Listen, pal – Blue Lives Matter!” And again, some of these friends have joined the activist network, contributed to the Facebook page, and make ample use of their own hashtag in social media, while others simply plead for the public to respect officers of the law.

I could go on... we could talk about groups formed around racial affinity, social causes, cultural heritage, political identity... You know these groups, right? And would you agree that to some extent, each of these groups has its own language? Each group to which we belong chooses vocabulary and structure and seeks to create meaning and purpose for those who ally with the group, right?

Jim Wallis is an activist and preacher who has written a book on race in the United States that is framed around a simple question: what if white Christians acted more Christian than white?

I have only read excerpts, and I cannot comment on the book, but that question got me thinking about a number of parallel queries:

What if American Christians acted more Christian than American? What if Republican or Democratic Christians acted more Christian than Republican or Democratic? What about Christians who are rich, or black, or liberal, or Penguin

fans, or women, or straight, or left-handed or... well, you get the idea... What if we sensed that our primary call, our first identity, our life-shaping affiliation was not political or cultural or racial but spiritual? What would happen if we really, truly, believed that?

I think we'd start learning new languages, is what. I think we'd be moving into a sea of people who think that black lives and blue lives and trans lives and straight lives and unborn children's lives and Sudanese lives and who knows who else's lives matter and that we'd be loving and supporting and listening and pointing to God's power in such a way as to engender a whole new series of conversations that begin with the phrases, "How can this be? Am I included?"

Many of you will remember the horrific genocide that occurred in the African nation of Rwanda in 1994. In a hundred days, close to a million lives were lost – mostly members of the Tutsi tribe who were brutally murdered by their Hutu neighbors as the world watched.

And maybe you remember that at the time of the genocide, more than 90% of the population of Rwanda claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. In 1994 Rwanda was regarded as one of the most "Christian" countries in the world... and yet hundreds of thousands of people were hacked to death... by machete-wielding Christians who apparently cared more about being Hutu or Tutsi than they did about following Jesus. The church failed in Rwanda.

And yet, in the southwest corner of the capitol city of Rwanda is an area called Nyamirambo. This community was home to both Tutsi and Hutu, and yet, according to researchers, there were very few, if any atrocities there during the genocide. Following the devastation, researchers went to this village and asked why? The people there said it was because they were Muslim first, and Rwandan second,

and Hutu or Tutsi third. One leader said, “Because their identity as Muslims is so fundamental, so important to them, that they could not envision killing one another. Their commitment to Allah created their fundamental identity, more important than any tribal or national identity.”²

So I repeat my question (or Wallis’ question, if you want to be a stickler): what would happen in our neighborhood if we were more Christian than anything else?

Listen: week after week, we come into this building and we ask God to give us some direction for our lives. “Show us what you want”, we say. “Tell us where you are moving.”

And the only thing I can think is that God is simply shaking his head, saying “Seriously? What do I have to do to get you to want to learn a few new languages?”

When I travel to Malawi, I do my best with Chichewa. And I get it wrong. A lot. But that’s how I try to show the people there that I’m serious about hearing their stories. This Pentecost, I need to remember that my attempts to be multilingual do not require a passport. Just an open heart, and a willingness to step outside to the people with whom God is already engaged... even if they don’t sound, look, act, or think like me. Send me, God. Teach me, God. Use me, God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² L. Gregory Jones, “Secret of Nyamirambo: A Haven in Rwanda” in **The Christian Century**, Dec 13, 2005.