

GOD IN ANY LANGUAGE

To summarize our scripture ... the story of the beginning of the church of Christ ... We can't hear this enough, can we?

In the John scripture, even before his death and resurrection, Jesus tries to tell the disciples about the Holy Spirit that will come to support them. Not just support them but through them, prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. It seems that spirit will become part of their human selves. Jesus says the spirit will 'take what is mine and declare it to you'.

Then, in Acts, the spirit comes!

All of them (the hundred or so disciples) were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. AND the entire amassed crowd (at the Festival in Jerusalem) from all over the world, wondered, "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" How is it we hear them speaking about GOD's deeds of power?" And Peter retorted the words of the prophet Joel from 500 years earlier ...

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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The holy spirit will be with EVERYONE!

The most startling announcement of this coming of the Holy Spirit, to the people hearing it from Cappadocia and Pontus and Pamphylia is that it is for everybody! There were a lot of divisions in the first century; cultural, age, religion, status. People who just weren't supposed to do things finally could be fully human in their relationship with God. 40-50% of all people in the Roman Empire were slaves who did not have a vote! Now they had a vote.

The world is now upside down because GOD sent the Holy Spirit to all of us. ALL of us!

We are pretty amazed at the arbitrary divisions of the first century ... for slaves and for women and for non-Roman citizens. But we, because we are humans with human DNA, still like our divisions. We can divide groups up by age, we can tell by looking who might be without a home, we can tell who might have more money by how they dress... maybe even how they walk; we can tell people who do certain jobs by their uniforms. And then we make judgments on these divisions that seem to help us identify our spots.

I learned recently that the second generation of European immigrants to North America do better than their first generation parents. This is because of things like smoothing our language, and North American education and North American work experience. That makes all kinds of sense. BUT I also learned that the second generation of non-European immigrants do not necessarily do better than their parents, even with the very same North American experiences as their European counterparts. Now there may be a number of reasons for this, but the one that jumps out to me is that of different skin colour or eye shape that does NOT go away like

distinguishing accents. Those of the Canadian 'settler' class, can still see the difference. AND WE DO Love to sort by 'sameness' ... One of these things is not like the other,... one of these things doesn't belong.

The wonder of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit was delivered to EVERYONE. The Holy spirit was available to all the people, previously divided by language, and custom, and politics, and social status, and honour and shame, and every division imaginable.

I would like to take a step back in time to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The common knowledge, certainly in the church I was raised in, is that the chaos that God caused by making people speak all different languages, that divided humanity into so many different pockets with so many different customs ... was a punishment for human arrogance.

However, there is a fresh interpretation among those scholars that study the migration of modern humanity around our globe; that God creating all those different languages at Babel was not punishing. It was not a punishment, but a necessary "step in God's original act of creation."¹ It was God's way to make creation better.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, instead of correcting the punishment of many cultures and languages, is enlivening a world where **differences exist, and do not divide us, but enrich us.**² Where God's goal for creation's success is "difference."

Sameness creates the same thing, but differences allow and inspire us to grow, expand, and create a new, formerly non-existent, condition if we can just find a way to appreciate the wonder of our differences.

The tower of Babel was not punishment, it was simply setting up the world for us to exercise our 'diversity muscles' in order to follow God's amazing plan for the beauty of the all the thoughts we haven't thought yet because we learn to approach someone who is different.

What are the muscles we exercise when we embrace differences?

First of all, we get to 'ask' instead of needing to 'know'.

Knowing and defending our 'knowing' takes a lot of our energy. The poet Augustin Belisl says, "Indeed we live more passionately because we are set free from burdensome work of holding on tightly to anything that comes within our grasp. Hold lightly to what we 'know'."

'Asking' exercises some valuable muscles. I googled some advantages of inquiry ... curiosity, wonder, encourages creativity, enhances engagement, cultivates skills for all areas of learning, preps the brain for learning, deepens understanding of 'why'.

There are so many things that we 'know' differently from each other ... things that could be a source of our inquiry. There are probably more differences than things that are the same when we consider all the influences. In addition to those who speak differently, wear clothes differently, and those whose facial characteristics are different enough from us that they are called a different race; there's who we love, who loves us. And not just language and culture and facial characteristics ... but whether we have whiskers or do

¹ Efrain Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Latinx, The Bible and Migration* (Place of publication not identified: Palgrave and MacMillan, 2019), 136.

² Agosto and Hidalgo, 142.

not have whiskers, if we had a delightful childhood, or did not; if we have a grand education, or do not; how we live within our gender; who we ally with or who we see as an enemy. These are all things that bring us to different places of 'truth' in our lives.

With all life's experiences, a person's truth is unique to them, and sometimes we don't even know what our own truth is until it gets pressed one. So, it's not easy to attempt to honour another's truth when even honouring our own truth can be tricky.

Inquiry takes patience and respect. The people in Jerusalem on that Pentecost day thought the speakers were drunk ... so maybe their linguistic skills were just beginning and sounded pretty bad. I have a couple of friends who bravely jump into English for my sake. They are not great at it, but I can tell you, they are better at English than I am at Arabic, or Mandarin, or French ... so we struggle knowing that we will be better for working through the struggle.

The Holy Spirit is with us in this struggle. The Holy Spirit is not only with us, but exists at the core of our being.

As Mike talked with us last week, we are not of the world, but we are sure in the world. We are in a world that is amazing and important and real to us. However, the world offers so many meanings, and so many expressions or 'right' and 'wrong' that we truly need to hold something MORE REAL than ALL those realities, to stay sane. We need something that endures at the core of our being. That wonder that is MORE REAL than all the thing of the world that seem real is God in the HOLY SPIRIT ... the only real truth. To honour God's creative ways of difference, we must see our sameness not in our language, our culture, our neighbourhood, or homeland but in our faith³. Jesus proclaims to us, "When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth,..."

The disciples are afraid at being separated from Jesus. They will become unafraid, not by being with Jesus and their God when they get to heaven, but because both God and the Christ come to make their home with the disciples as the core of their earthly beings. The Holy Spirit makes home with us, right here, in the world where we live. Not only where 'we' live, but where 'all the we's' live.

Our scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Church in Rome says that "God prays in us". Our job is to hold the space that God can now pray in.

We speak of the disciples 'receiving' the Spirit at Pentecost, but they already had it ... Joel, five hundred years earlier, proclaims "The spirit is poured out on all flesh."

IN THIS PENTECOST STORY, the space for God's prayer in us gets layed opened as all those present overcome fear and mistrust and all the misgivings of the 'different'. The Holy Spirit is not a mystic experience, but just opening ourselves to 'the others', being a vessel for love ... a vessel of God's love.

This opening of ourselves to the other is a Pentecostal thing to do and it can be tiring until we get our muscles built up.

The most Pentecostal thing to do is to affirm people as they are, rather than ask them to conform to our expectations.

³ Gale A. Yee et al., eds., *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: Old Testament, Apocrypha, New Testament*, vol. Volume One and Two (Fortress Press, 2014), 555.

The most Pentecostal thing to do is to assume God has been with all others in their journey, even when that journey is different from ours.

The most Pentecostal thing to do is to accept others, not just for who they are but also for what they can never be.

The most Pentecostal thing to do is to stop worrying about being comfortable and meet others where they are.

The most Pentecostal thing to do is to be courageous enough to be foolish and naïve for the sake of love.

Be clear that your light shines for others to see the light of God, so let that light shine in inquiry, respect and love.

Our scripture in Acts proclaims: “And in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” Yes, God’s deeds of power. Everyone settled that God was at the focus of this amazing day. When God is at the focus of every amazing day, we can loose the fear and anxiety about the ‘other’, knowing that we are all full of the Holy Spirit ... all of us! To grow in our perspectives and thoughts we can actually ‘know’ less and ‘seek’ more. “Conserve our strength for God’s work. Hold lightly to what we know.”

I leave some questions with us because this is only the beginning of our inquiry of differences. If God’s plan, all the way from Babel, is to live in the amazing world of differences, then how could we could seek, rather than simply inquire of difference. If difference is God’s plan how might we encourage different, honouring and applauding differences? How can we find ways to express our differences and find ways to encourage others to express their differences, not only in culture and language, but in our highly charged environment of Biblical interpretation, Christology, or even our name for God? And how, when someone’s difference offends, or hurts us, can we stop and inquire?

The application of the Golden Rule is more challenging than I had ever thought. As we actually practice loving our neighbour as ourselves, how do we seek to disagree without becoming disagreeable, or to stop talking to each other altogether? May the Holy Spirit pour on us as we struggle to follow God’s all-encompassing commandment to Love God, Love our Neighbour and Love ourselves.

In the name of the Holy Spirit, AMEN