

In Their Own Native Language

Summer Series on Acts Week 2

Acts 2:1-13, 38-41

June 9, 2019 Pentecost Sunday

Have you ever tried to learn a new language? At my first church, we were part of a ministry at the Parx Casino and racetrack in Bensalem. Each week different churches came and helped host a chapel service and dinner for the “backstretch” workers— not the jockeys who you see on race day, but everybody else: the stable hands, groomers, and trainers who work with the horses day in and day out. Many of them were from outside the US, working here and sending money back home to support their families, and Spanish was their native language.

I started practicing a few Spanish phrases with them at the dinners, and one night I got brave and introduced myself to the whole group at chapel. “Buenos noches” I said. They said, “Buenos noches” back. Good evening. Then I said, “Me llamo Dorry.” Or at least that’s what I should have said. I knew I goofed something up because right away there were stifled snickers and laughs. Turns out, instead of saying, “Me llamo Dorry” which means, I call myself Dorry, I said, “Me amo Dorry”, which means, I love myself! No wonder they were laughing.

To the untrained ear, me amo and me llamo sound pretty close, but that one little sound, the “y”, makes all the difference! So I am completely wowed when I read in our scripture lesson today that the first Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak. And they obviously spoke fluently, because people responded and, on the spot, became Christians! Can you imagine, suddenly being able to *fluently* speak a different language? Not just a few phrases and words here and there, but enough to be able to talk about and answer questions about your faith?

You may remember a few weeks ago when I brought in this Easter book written in Spanish. It’s for kids—but it’s not an easy read! First I asked my friend Debbie to read it with me. She teaches high school Spanish and knew most of the words, but not all. Then I had my daughter read it. She was stumped by a few of the words, too. Then I had my son’s girlfriend Jenn read it to me. Spanish is her family’s primary language, which was obvious in how quickly she read the book compared to Deb and Adrienne. But it made me feel a little better when she had to call her mom about a couple words! A kids’ book about Easter—and three fluent adults had found it challenging.

I’ll tell you what. I think we underestimate what happened on Pentecost. We read this scripture passage every year, but how often do we stop to consider just how amazing that day was? That anyone could ever tell the story of Jesus in a different language from their

own, that is a huge accomplishment, one that would take many months or years of study. But to be able to relate the story of Jesus in a different language *spontaneously*—that is a huge miracle!

Let's be sure to take note: telling the gospel story in a multitude of languages is the very first miracle of the Church. Pentecost is often called the birthday of the Christian church. It was the first time the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was publicly proclaimed by people who witnessed it firsthand. Three thousand people heard the story and became believers on the spot. They repented of their sins, were baptized, and from there, the Church grew and struggled and grew some more. We are going to read all about the early Church's growth and struggles this summer as we study the book of Acts. But for today, let's let this sink in: the very first miracle of the Christian church was to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in foreign languages.

That first miracle of the Church lines up perfectly with Christ's commission to the Church at the end of the gospel of Matthew (28:19-20). Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach my gospel to every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Our job is to replicate the day of Pentecost: to go wherever people are gathered, and speak to them using words they will understand, so that they may believe and be baptized and learn how to be disciples.

Since Day One, literally, the Church has been trying to translate the story of Jesus into every language in the world. You'd think, in 2,000 years, that job would be finished by now. But according to the American Bible Society, whose headquarters, incidentally, are right here in Philadelphia, at least some portion of the Bible has been translated into only 3,500 languages. That sounds like a lot, right? But there are 6,901 languages in the world used as primary first languages. That means Bible translators still have a lot of work to do! And, what's more, researchers believe that about 2/3 of the world's population are oral communicators—that is, they prefer non-literate means of learning. As important as translating the Bible is, it's not enough. Many people will never hear the message of Jesus by reading it for themselves. They will need someone to tell it to them. They will need someone to speak it to them in a language they can understand.

Seems to me, the job of "translating" the gospel story is work that will never get done. We all get the privilege of being part of the Pentecost miracle! We have Sunday school, so children can hear about God in their own language—not a foreign language, but in words and activities that speak to them. That's why we have Vacation Bible school, too. So kids can come and hear about God's love, and it gets reinforced with games and crafts and songs, and hopefully foster a lifelong connection to God. We are blessed to have so many wonderful volunteers, to offer these ministries.

Because the world is always changing, our methods of sharing the gospel must always be changing. This year we are offering Vacation Bible school at night. There are two main reasons for this change, one of which is that we have more volunteers available at night. But the second reason is to try to help Vacation Bible school achieve its ultimate goal. We do not offer VBS just to give kids a fun week and a few Bible lessons, although

both those things are good. We offer it to help children make a lifelong connection to God. In recent years, our Vacation Bible school has had plenty of children attending for the week—but no families returning to the church afterwards. This year the number of children enrolled is less than half what we've had in the past. But we are going to close the week with a mini worship-service in fellowship hall, to try to give the families a taste of what our 9:45 service is like. We are hoping they will see, hey, this is pretty neat, and come back!

Of course, we have no idea if it will work. But I hope you are proud of your church for trying something new in an effort to be faithful to our calling. This goal, communicating the gospel in ways that people understand and that will lead to a lifetime of discipleship—in other words, trying to fulfill Christ's commission to us—is why our church has a Facebook page, and an Instagram account, and a Twitter feed. How many of you use Twitter? Instagram? Facebook? For many of us, social media is a language we do not understand at all! But among millennials—that is, people who are 23 to 38 years old, 90% of them use social media on any given day. That means, if we want to reach younger people, we have to learn to use their language. We are blessed that our lay leader, Sabrina, is helping us in this area.

Wanting to connect to new people is also the reason why we are launching a new website. More and more, people want to test drive everything before they go in person. They look to the internet and want to see the entire menu posted before they will try a new restaurant. They watch trailers online of new movies before deciding whether to buy tickets. The same is true before they will visit a new church. They want an anonymous way to see what the place is all about before setting foot inside.

You may have noticed this trend in yourself and a change in your own shopping habits. The difference with younger people, though, is they are almost always doing this research on their phones. Our old website has been and continues to be maintained faithfully by a special volunteer. We are so blessed by her dedication! But the old website company was getting harder to work with, and the platform was not phone friendly. So, in an effort to reach people in the language they understand and use all the time for everything else, we changed our website so it would connect well with people who are looking on their phones.

Again, I hope you are proud of your church for trying something new in an effort to be faithful to our calling. Sometimes faithfulness means standing behind the old, but often faithfulness means courageously stepping in to the new. After our denomination's special general conference in February, several people approached me about forming a Reconciling Team here at Lima. I think everyone is a little nervous about this work. But we are trying this new thing in an effort to be faithful. We have church members, family members, and neighbors who need to know that Lima Church is indeed a safe place for all. Our old ways of doing things have not communicated that message in a language everyone can truly understand. So now we are searching for new words, new methods, of discerning our hearts and communicating that to the world.

To do that, we need to expand our vocabulary. That is why we are having a workshop on June 18th on human sexuality. You may think you know all there is to know about s-e-x, but none of us knows all there is to know on any subject, let alone something as mysterious as sex. Did you know that our local public library has, I believe it's one Friday a month, a drag queen come in and read books to children on diversity, acceptance, creativity and love? Yes, I said drag queen. If you don't know what that is, or why one would come to the library and read to kids—well, that is why we are having the workshop on June 18th. There is a lot happening that we simply never talk about in church, and there is no way we can tell the gospel story in words others can understand if we don't know something about the words and ideas they live with every day.

Wanting to share the gospel in ways people can understand is at the heart of everything we do here at Lima. We know that the Spirit is still empowering believers to speak in new ways. But unlike that first Pentecost, we don't get spontaneous fluency. We have to work at it. Any time we learn a new language, we can expect to make mistakes. We can expect to mis-speak. We can expect some blunders. We will say “me amo” instead of “me llamo.” When things like that happen, we have the opportunity to humble ourselves and wash the feet of our sisters and brothers. We get to practice using the language of grace with each other. We may or may not be “successful” from an earthly standpoint. There is no guarantee we will reach and foster long-term connections with new people. But by trying, we will be found faithful! Our job is to do our best, and trust God with the rest.

You don't have to tell me that the world is changing fast, maybe even too fast. It would be nice if church were the one place we could count on to be the same. That isn't possible, because the Church is a living organism. It is called together and sustained by the Living Spirit of God. And that Spirit of God is calling us to change and grow and learn. The Living Spirit of God is here right now, expanding our souls, and at the same time, calling us to let go...all so that others may come to know Christ, just as we have had the awesome privilege of coming to know Christ. Amen.