

Montague Pastoral Charge

May 28, 2023 – Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

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Sermon: “A Thousand Tongues”

Languages are fascinating things. There are about 7000 languages in the world, and each one is complex and beautiful in unique ways. For example, just consider all the different sounds we make with our mouths when we speak English. And then consider a language called Taa, which is spoken in southern Africa. English has a lot of sounds, but Taa has over twice as many: 31 different vowels, 58 consonants (including some very tricky clicking sounds), and 4 tones. Tones, as you may know, are the *itches*. In lots of languages, the pitch that you say something in makes a huge difference. In Chinese, for example, “má” with the voice going up means one thing; “mà” with the voice going down means something completely different. And there are actually some languages that have such rich tones – so much rising and falling of the pitch – that you can actually whistle them. In Mexico, the Indigenous Chinantec people have been whistling their language across mountains for centuries – it carries across the canyons better when you whistle.

Sound is one thing; then of course there’s the grammar – and that can get a lot more complex even than those verb conjugations you had to memorise in French or Latin. In Inuktitut you often have to express a whole, complicated sentence in one long, elaborate, carefully crafted word. Then there’s a language spoken by people in the Caucasus Mountains where a verb like “run” can come in over 1.5 million forms. Compare that to English where we have three: “run, runs, ran.” Then there’s grammatical gender: the way certain words are in different gender groups, as if some are male and some are female. And so in French for some reason we have to say *le stylo* but *la table*; as if the pen is a boy but the table is a girl. That alone seems pretty tricky, but then there are languages in Africa that have as many as twenty different grammatical genders! It isn’t just that things are male or female; then there all sorts of other categories that have nothing to do with biology. There might be a grammatical gender for plants, a gender for round things, a gender that covers cows and hand tools, and so on.

It’s amazing, the diversity of human language. And it’s frankly amazing that little children can pick up some of these languages at all. Languages are hard, and often it’s hard not to think of different languages as a *problem* to be solved. Every year translation issues cost international businesses billions of dollars in lost trade. And new immigrants will know well how language barriers can make things like health care very difficult. When we try to learn French in school, we’re rarely doing it because French grammar is interesting and stimulating; we’re doing it because it will pay off in the long run. To us, a world with 7000 languages can’t help feeling like a bit of a problem to be overcome.

And that’s quite apart from all the funny little things that happen when we try to speak other languages, like the German woman at the restaurant who asks, “Could I please become a turkey sandwich” – because in German “bekomm” means “get.” When I was doing a semester’s

study in Poland, I learned that, in Polish, when you didn't hear what someone said and you'd like them to repeat it, the way we would say, "Come again?" or "Pardon me?" they'll often say "Jeszcze raz?" which means "One more time?" That's a very useful phrase to know when you're a newcomer, and I was quick to pick up the phrase I was hearing. After three months or so, though, I realised that I had misheard; I was saying not "Jeszcze raz" but "Jeż teraz," which does not mean "One more time?" but rather "Hedgehog now?" You can imagine my mortification on realising that for months I had been interrupting conversations asking for a hedgehog. (Fortunately, though, it did have the desired effect. You can take this advice if you're ever travelling; when you ask "Hedgehog now?" to the person selling your train tickets, they generally *will* repeat what they just said.)

In the story of the first Christian Pentecost, we heard how Jews from all around the world were gathered in Jerusalem, 50 days after Passover. This was normal; they had come for the Festival of Weeks, *Shavuot*, when Jews would celebrate the wheat harvest, as well as God's covenants with Noah and Moses, and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Luke, the narrator, doesn't paint much of a picture for us, so we tend to fill in the details ourselves. I always used to imagine a scene where hundreds of pilgrims are gathered together at some great dining hall, all talking in a cacophony of different languages, where no one can understand each other. It is a classic case of the curse of the Tower of Babel, when God scattered the people: all these different languages, and no communication. What a terrible thing: they can't connect with each other, let alone get any business done.

But notice, nowhere in the text does it actually say that the people couldn't understand each other. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappadocians, Egyptians, Romans...all those different cultures – we'd assume they couldn't communicate, but that might not actually be the case. For one thing, they probably all had some understanding of Hebrew from the Bible, and they could get along a little with that. But also, it's pretty likely that they all could and did speak some common language like Aramaic or Greek. Greek was the most useful language to know across the Roman world in those days; it was a lot like English is today. Most people knew a some basic Greek in those days – even Jesus and the disciples probably knew a little bit. We in the English-speaking world tend to forget just how common it is in the world for people to be bilingual. But over half the world is fluent in second language; in many countries, speaking a second language is just a way of life.

And so maybe the communication problem at Pentecost is a little different. What we have might not be a whole bunch of people pointing and miming to be understood; we have a bunch of people who *are* communicating to each other, but haltingly, brokenly, using a foreign language that's not their own – a second or third language to many of them. Probably they're talking a kind of low-level Greek: they won't have the elegant grammar or the subtle shades of meaning and nuance that they would have if they were speaking their own language. They're getting by. They're speaking to each other in the lowest common denominator of human language.

But then, the Holy Spirit rushes in, with the roaring of wind and the blaze of fire. "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." This is not some wispy vapour; this is like the "rush of a violent wind"; this is God the Holy Spirit, the living Breath that blows out complacency and injustice and mediocrity. All the chaff of this party flies out the window, and that includes this limp semi-

language that they're all speaking. This mediocre, bland communication in a lingua franca that everyone can sort-of speak is not good enough for God the Spirit. The Spirit demands better than that, and so what the Spirit does is to *create*, not just communication, but communion. With a weird heavenly tongue of fire over each person's head, everyone starts to speak, not in basic Greek, but in someone else's own mother-tongue.

The people are bewildered; they don't know what's going on. "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Suddenly they can speak perfect Mandarin without learning the difference between "má" and "mà"; suddenly they're speaking fluent Swahili without knowing learning about the nine grammatical genders.

When the great King James Bible translation was being put together by a committee of scholars, back in the early 1600s, a man named Lancelot Andrewes was in charge of overseeing the project. Andrewes himself was a great preacher and a Hebrew scholar. He knew all about the challenges of translating different languages. But Lancelot Andrewes didn't think of different languages as a problem. In one of his sermons on Pentecost, Andrews came to a really amazing conclusion, that language diversity is not a problem, but a marvellous thing. That's one reason that the King James Bible used the such a rich and diverse sort of English for its day. The gift of the Holy Spirit, according to Andrews, is "a benefit so great and so wonderful as there were not tongues upon earth to celebrate it withal, but there were fain to be more sent from Heaven to help to sound it out thoroughly, even a new supply of tongues from Heaven. For all the tongues in earth were not sufficient to magnify God for His goodness, in sending down to men the gift of the Holy Ghost."

In other words, the problem isn't that there are too many languages in the world; the problem is that there are not enough. We sing, "O, for a thousand tongues to sing," but even a thousand human tongues are not enough. At Pentecost the Spirit comes down to add even more, a fiery tongue over each person. God wants more than communication; God wants communion. God wants a people who get united not by levelling out their diversity but by celebrating it. The more tongues, the better; because each tongue can speak in a different way about the wonder of God's love. At Pentecost, a Messiah has just been raised from the dead, and making sense of that will take all the language the people can throw at it. Lancelot Andrewes says, "It was not meet [that] one tongue only should be employed that way, as before but one was. It was too poor and slender, like the music of a monochord. Far more meet was it that many tongues, yea, that all tongues should do it; which, as a concert of many instruments, might yield a full harmony."

I'm afraid Lancelot Andrews would be disappointed if he were living today, because we are losing the world's languages faster than ever. Every year, an average of 9 languages go extinct, never to be spoken in real life again. There might be a grammar and a dictionary on a university library bookshelf, but that's it. And that rate of extinction is getting faster. The languages the world is losing are especially Indigenous languages, in Canada, the USA, Australia, and elsewhere. Pentecost teaches us just what a tragedy that is. The praise of God takes more than one common language; it takes every human tongue the world has to offer, and more. Only in the world's great diversity can we start to express who God really is; only by sharing a whole world of different languages will we begin to be able to express the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love. And even that will not be enough; it will take flaming tongues from above to boot.

This week I was attending our Regional Council at UPEI, learning about what's going on in the wider United Church in the Maritimes. It was a very hopeful meeting, and one of the exciting things is to see the increasing diversity within our United Church. There are more and more thriving United Churches that worship in Korean and other minority languages. And there are ministers transferring into our church from other denominations, from Africa and Asia and around the world. But one of the presenters yesterday also shared a troubling statistic: even though so many churches are without clergy, many of these new ministers are simply not having their applications considered by congregations. Gifted and experienced clergy who have chosen to be part of our denomination cannot find positions, to the point that our Office of Vocations has actually had to stop admitting new ministers from the global community, until the ones who already have been admitted can find jobs. Whether it's because of accent and language, or cultural difference, or skin colour, many churches in Canada would rather go without clergy than to call a minister from, say, Ghana.

The speaker yesterday had stern words on that, because that just won't do. The Holy Spirit has no time for that lurking racism. If Pentecost teaches us nothing else, it teaches us that diversity is the true Church's great strength. Difference isn't a problem to be solved; we don't need a single homogenised tongue to level our differences; that would only impoverish our witness. We don't just want communication, we want communion with each other, with all the complexity and grammatical nuance that comes with that. The miracle of Pentecost is not that the people understood each other; the miracle is that they understood each other in their own native languages. Suddenly some obscure language spoken by 200 people at the top of a mountain in Turkey becomes a holy tongue of the Church.

How does that happen? Well, as the story goes, the miracle of tongues doesn't happen just anytime, anywhere; it happens on Pentecost. It happens on the holiday when Jews were remembering and renewing God's covenant with Moses, and the gift of the law, the constitution of their sacred history. And more than that, it was a time when Jews would remember and renew God's covenant with Noah: the covenant between God and all flesh, all people and creatures. How appropriate that these early followers of Jesus would receive the miracle of language on that day, when they are beginning to see how the story of Jesus might just fit into the very heart of that sacred story. What they hear in their own languages, when the fiery tongues come upon them, is not just any words; what they hear is the story of what God has done. "In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Not the conference-room conversation about the quality of the coffee; but the revelation of God's deeds of power. If we complain that we have never had a Pentecost miracle of understanding, perhaps it's because we are not talking about the right things – the big things, the works of God for a people who are beautiful in their diversity.

In our "minute for missions," we sometimes hear about some of the Indigenous language revitalisation projects that are going on across the country, which we have the privilege of supporting with our gifts. We should celebrate those projects, even though it isn't about improving international trade or setting up our children for better jobs in the future. It's about being the whole people of God, and being able to proclaim God's grace with every tongue we can muster. As Lancelot Andrews said, "For all the tongues in earth were not sufficient to magnify God for His goodness, in sending down to men the gift of the Holy Ghost." And to that I can only add, "Hedgehog now!"