

Language of the Spirit

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21 (June 5, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Today we have two stories about language. One tells the story of the Tower of Babel – a tragic story of human pride. The other tells the story of Pentecost – the Spirit is at work in the world, forming a new global community of God’s people.



Do you know how many languages there are in the world? Take a guess. The latest count is 7,099. And that number is increasing as new language groups emerge. These languages are always changing and, even as new ones are discovered, others face the risk of extinction.¹

I wonder how many languages we have represented here in our congregation? English speakers, certainly. What else? Various German dialects, which are part of our Mennonite heritage. And Russian? Ukrainian? Norwegian? Spanish? Any French? Others? What have I missed?

Can you name the third most familiar language in Saskatchewan, after English and French? Are you surprised to learn it is Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines? And after that it is an indigenous language: Cree.²



Language can be a sensitive topic. It’s very much associated with our cultural heritage and identity. Take away language and much is lost. Which is why the government of Quebec recently introduced a controversial new bill designed to protect the French language in that province.

So also First Nations have established programs in schools to reclaim what was taken away in the process of colonization. Albert Scott, a language and culture coordinator for the Saskatoon Tribal Council, insists that native ceremonies be performed in native languages.

He claims that otherwise “the Creator won’t understand. ... Once we lose our ceremonies,” he says, we’ll be just like everyone else – lost. A person without any culture or identity – nothing to feel proud of.”³

When Lindsay and I enrolled our children in school, we chose a French Immersion program. We did that because we see the value of learning another language – whatever it may be. It’s good to know there is *more* to the world than our small piece of it. Good to see things from



¹ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-languages-are-there-in-the-world.html>, Accessed May 2, 2022.

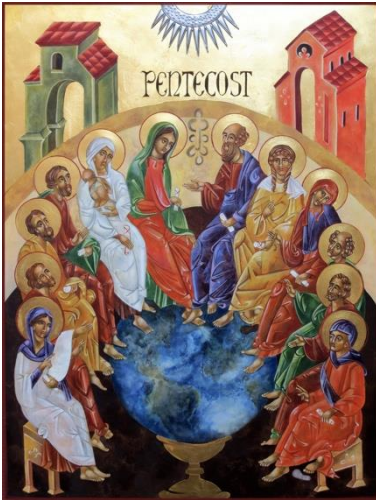
² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Saskatchewan#Languages, Accessed May 2, 2022.

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/indigenous-language-lost-sask-1.4234798#:~:text=With%2058%20distinct%20languages%2C%20First%20Nation%20communities%20in,what%20could%20happen%20when%20Indigenous%20languages%20are%20erased>, Accessed May 3, 2022.

another perspective. Good to be able to communicate with a wide variety of folks. And maybe also good to have an advantage in searching for a job.



Do *we* need to learn new languages? That's a good question. And it's one our reading from the book of Acts seems to address.



It was the day of Pentecost, a Jewish harvest festival that took place 50 days after Passover. Crowds of people were gathered in Jerusalem to share the festivities. Luke tells us that disciples of Jesus were all together in one place. Suddenly an amazing thing happened!

There was a rush of wind, and tongues of fire, and the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. And what was the result? “They began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Jews from every nation were there in Jerusalem. They heard the commotion and were stunned to hear these Galileans speaking in their native tongue. Luke pauses the story here, to let this sink in. Listen to the long list that follows.

“Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” All I can say is “Well done, Harry, for getting through that list.” Biblical names and places are a nightmare for public scripture readers!



So here are these people, from all over the Mediterranean world. And somehow, miraculously, they hear these disciples – uneducated, from small towns and fishing villages ... the least likely folk you could imagine, speaking about God's great deeds of power. And doing it like they'd travelled the world.

All these languages! Grammar, A+! Vocabulary, complete! Pronunciation, you'd think they'd grown up with it! Not a hint of an accent.



And here's me: functionally – one language. Oh, I do have high school French, but that's pretty rusty, and was never that great to begin with. And biblical Greek – a written language which hasn't been used for centuries.



Can we learn *new* languages? Is the Spirit able to do that work in us? This offers some intriguing possibilities!

The Spirit gives us the language of faith. These disciples are not engaged in pleasant conversation about the weather – they're talking about “the mighty deeds of God.” Perhaps they were speaking of Jesus – his life, death and resurrection. Isn't that the mightiest deed of all?



Photo by Skip The Budgie,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/skip/111045024/>

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) So here it begins in Jerusalem.

Disciples of Jesus have a story to share, one that will change the world. Maybe they were speaking from their own encounter with Jesus. Something that impressed them, something they had learned, something that changed them.

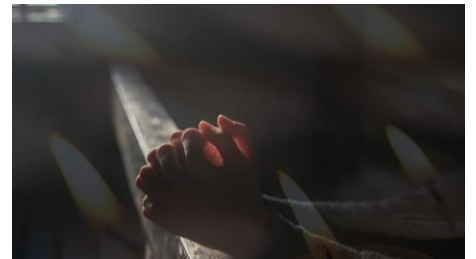
We may not have been there with those first-century folk, but we too have encounters with the living Lord. Experiences that touch us deeply. As a pastor I’m privileged to hear such things: “The Lord was with me.” “The Lord gave me a strength I didn’t know I had. I’m so thankful!” “The Lord was guiding me through that whole situation. I was not alone.”



The Spirit gives us language to speak about these things. To speak *about* God and to speak *with* God.

“When we cry Abba! Father!” says the apostle Paul, when we use that most intimate prayer language, it is the Spirit at work within us. When we cannot find the words to say, when we have difficulty expressing ourselves, when our emotions run too deep to put into words, the Spirit gives us language beyond words.

Do you ever find prayer to be difficult? If so, you’re not alone. “The Spirit,” says Paul, intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit.” (Romans 8:15-16, 26-27)



The Spirit gives us a language to *live*. The Spirit takes the life of Jesus and helps us embody it. So the same things we see in his life take shape in *our* lives too: Acts of kindness and caring. Deeds of service, love and healing.

Jesus told the disciples it was good that he was leaving. I’m sure they couldn’t understand it at the time. But he said it’s to your benefit. Because if I go, I will send the Advocate, the Spirit, to be with you. (John 16:7) That life-transforming, gift-giving Spirit. The Spirit that changes us day-by-day, conforming us to the image of Christ. Teaching us the way of justice and peace, the path of reconciliation.

The Spirit gives us *love*. If I speak the language of every tribe and nation on *earth* below and *heaven* above, “but do not have love” it’s just meaningless babble! We need to articulate the Christ-life. And only the transforming power of the Spirit can do that.



The Spirit gives us the language of faith.

And finally, the Spirit gives us a language that builds community. It strengthens bonds between people. It brings understanding. Not the confusion of Babel, but the surprising familiarity of Pentecost. Surely we *need* some understanding these days. Have you noticed how divided we’ve become? There are forces in our world that just play to that division, creating an unrelenting sense of anger and hostility.

Difference, in itself, is not the problem here. God made us to be different. The languages and cultures we bear were given to us by our creator.



In the Babel story, the Lord comes down to see what is happening and is dismayed at humanity's pride. They want to build a name for *themselves*, not for God. They want to build a tower that stretches to the heavens. But God wants them to stretch to the ends of the earth. So God confused their plan and gifted them with many languages. Though I'm sure it didn't seem like much of a gift. (God's ways are not always ours.)

We want to build empires. *God* wants us to experience the rich and vibrant community which is the hallmark of God's kingdom. Notice that in the great vision for the end of all time, there's a scene that pictures a multitude in heaven. And who is there?

There are jokes about this. St. Peter giving someone who's died a tour. And when they pass by the Mennonites, or the Baptists – or whatever label you'd like to insert at this point – Peter tells the person they need to be very quiet. And when the person asks why, he whispers "It's because they like to think they're the only ones."

But hear this vision from the book of Revelation: "I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." There, with many languages, in a mass choir, where every culture that has ever been is on display, they sing a song of salvation.



Sometimes we think our individuality, our distinctiveness, our difference is something to be downplayed. "When I see a black person," someone proclaimed proudly, "I don't even notice their colour."

That might sound good, but actually it's part of the problem! We need to value one another, for who we *really* are! A whole variety of colours, and customs, and ways of being.



Can you imagine how things might have turned out if the colonists who settled here in North America had valued Indigenous people and their ways? Perhaps we would not be dealing with the disastrous legacy of Residential Schools.

Pentecost does not negate our differences! The people hear not one language but *many*. "We hear them telling *in our own tongues* the mighty works of God." The gospel takes many forms, so that all may hear the Good News. And this is the miracle of Pentecost. *This* is the Spirit's working.





Can *we* learn new languages? The language of our neighbours whose experience may be very different from our own? The language of another generation, whether older or younger – parents, children, grandchildren – sometimes it’s so hard for us to comprehend. The language of immigrants and newcomers. The language of many voices, and distinct points of view.

The Spirit brings unity to this diversity. It draws us to Jesus, the healer who brings forgiveness and reconciliation to the world. As we follow the way of Christ, the Spirit forms us in his image.

In a few moments we will gather at the table of our Lord. We, who come from so many places and speak in different ways. Here we acknowledge that Christ is Lord. And he is calling us to be brothers and sisters, members of a new community. And to undertake the hard, but Spirited, work of building that community day by day.

So on this day of Pentecost may we learn the language of the Spirit. And as we share this meal, may we lift up our hearts in gratitude as we say together, “Thanks be to God!”