



LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE

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Acts 2:1-21

Rev. Rebekah McLeod Hutto, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

On any given day on the 4th floor of the Brick Church Parish House, where the pastors' offices are located, you can hear the Coordinator to the Senior Minister's office, Lena Tharp, speaking in multiple languages. It can get animated at times, especially when she's talking to her family, and if it's a stressful week she'll regularly switch from one language to another as she talks to herself. You see, Lena's parents are Portuguese but she grew up in Germany, so she speaks German, Portuguese and English fluently. Due to her own interest in languages, she's also conversant in French and Spanish, and she's picking up more and more Italian. I recently learned how important her linguistic skills are when I married a couple at Brick Church whose families are French and English. As Lena helped coordinate the rehearsal and wedding, she transitioned back and forth from English to French and French to English in order to make sure everyone understood.

For me personally, Lena's proficiency in language is rare, because outside of studying Greek and Hebrew in seminary—languages I am certainly not conversant in—I only speak English. Unless we come from immigrant communities, for many of us who grow up in America, we usually only learn one language from birth. We might study a second or third language in school, or even later in our professional work, but it's not the usual practice in our country to learn multiple languages from birth. This is not the case in many other countries in the world. Children, from birth, grow up speaking at least two languages, sometimes three, and this kind of linguistic ability shapes how they see the world.



Because it's so cosmopolitan, New York City is different than most of America. Any given day, walking down the streets of this city, you can be confronted by multiple languages from a variety of cultures and nationalities. As a show of hands today, how many of you are conversant in more than one language? More than two? More than three? Congratulations! One couple in this church, in fact, speaks six languages between them: English, French, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish and Spanish. It's worth noting though, the spouse in this marriage who knows more languages didn't grow up in America.

If you are one of these talented linguists, then the Pentecost story in Acts 2 is written for you. If you're like me and not, there's a bit of a learning curve here. As Helen said, and beautifully named all the nations, Pentecost is a story of the Holy Spirit's ability to create the church among a diverse array of peoples. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit falls upon everyone gathered in Jerusalem for the harvest festival. On the back of your bulletin today you'll see where all of these peoples are coming from—from every corner of the known world at that time. When the Spirit came there was wind and fire, loud sounds and lots of speech. Inspired by the Spirit, everyone began speaking multiple languages. The noise became so disruptive that those around them thought they were drunk. And can you blame them? Just imagine the scene... Jerusalem, already a diverse city, begins to be filled with a cacophony of dialects, accents and tongues. The Holy Spirit on Pentecost creates complex speech filled with diversity.

One New Testament scholar notes, "in Jesus' day, multiple languages were spoken. Latin was the official language of the Empire; however, most of Roman daily affairs were likely conducted in Greek. Likewise, Hebrew was the religious language of the Jewish religion, but many of the Jews in Israel at that time conversed in Aramaic. Of course, in Jerusalem itself, as a cultural center, there were multiple other languages from the reaches of the empire and beyond."¹ So in Jesus' time, they too walked the streets hearing multiple languages, and many spoke more than one from birth. The story of Pentecost makes this linguistic reality

¹ "The Politics of Language—Acts 2:1-21" by Amy L. Allen from Political Theology Network:
<https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-language-acts-21-21-amy-allen/>



even more dramatic because on that day all of those languages, and more, were being spoken at the same time, AND folks understood each other. Far away from their homelands, the people heard their native speech in the mouth of the person next to them! Later in the Pentecost story we learned that 3,000 joined the church that day, all from a variety of nations and dialects.

Up to this point, Jesus' disciples had been a fairly close-knit group. Now at Pentecost, the message of Jesus' love and sacrifice is being communicated to more and more people in more and more languages...languages that people don't just hear, but they understand. They understand...the peoples gathered on Pentecost heard their native languages—their mother tongues—in the mouths of their neighbors. There's something quite intimate about hearing your mother tongue. Lena told me that although she is conversant in many languages, when she sees a child or even when she held her own child for the first time, it is Portuguese that immediately comes to her lips. She said she goes to it instinctually as if it's the primary language she's always known. Portuguese is the language of her home, of her heart. It's her mother tongue, as intimately known to her as a family member. So, on Pentecost, imagine what it was like for individuals to hear their mother tongue in the mouth of a foreigner.

For those who know multiple languages, or for those who are away from their homeland, hearing your mother tongue in a foreign land opens up an intimacy between people. When I asked Lena what it's like to hear her mother tongue in New York City, she said her ears immediately perk when she hears Portuguese. The spouse of the church member I mentioned earlier is always delightfully surprised to hear Lithuanian, her mother tongue, outside of Lithuania, and I imagine she immediately strikes up a conversation with whomever the stranger is who speaks it.

New Testament theologian Amy Allen tells a story when she was in seminary working as a chaplain at a large public hospital in Dallas, Texas. She says, *“Many of the people who came into the hospital were Hispanic, and so, as a part of my orientation, I was given a set of index cards with simple Spanish phrases and prayers. One day, not long after I had begun this position, I was called to the room*



of a frantic elderly woman. The nurses were trying to calm her down, but she was clearly agitated and angry, chiding them in Spanish. ‘What can you do, Chaplain?’ they asked. I was twenty-one years old,” Amy said “I knew only the Spanish that was written on my little index card. And I knew even less about how to calm down frantic patients in a hospital. So I did the only thing I could think to do—I pulled out my index card and began to read: “Padre nuestro...” The Lord’s Prayer. I’m sure my pronunciation was horrible. But the woman stopped. She smiled softly at me, bowed her head, and whispering, joined in the prayer as I continued. Somewhere, across whatever chaos and division was between her and I, she had felt seen. Acknowledged. And so she was able to hear the calming words of her savior.”²

The audacity of Pentecost is not that the Holy Spirit can speak multiple languages. The audacity of Pentecost is that God speaks our language, our human speech.³ On Pentecost, God speaks our language and then the Spirit brings us the intimacy of hearing our native language from the mouth of the one next to us. The Spirit highlights our diversity but is also able to draw us together, creating a new community from many nations. Using the intimacy of speech, our human speech, the Holy Spirit creates the Church, reminding us that God’s love transcends all boundaries.

For those of you who know me it's no secret that I love the Pentecost story. I love it liturgically but I also love it for what it says about the church. Maybe for what it says about what the church can be. Pentecost says that the church was created, from its very beginning, to be a community of diverse nationalities, origins, and skin colors. Pentecost teaches us that God’s love speaks more than one language. But more than that, it says that we can recognize our Lord's voice in the language of another, in the dialect of another, in the nationality of another. Pentecost offers us this reality, and the Holy Spirit gives us the power to not just believe it but to live it.

² “The Politics of Language—Acts 2:1-21” by Amy L. Allen from Political Theology Network: <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-language-acts-21-21-amy-allen/>

³ Much of this idea and the influence of native speech/mother tongue I get from Willie James Jennings’ commentary *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press (April 24, 2017).



But it takes practice and muscle memory to live this multilingual reality of Pentecost. For those of you who've learned other languages or are still learning them, it takes discipline to form the words of new speech, to memorize its grammar and vocabulary. Thanks to her fluency, Lena's now 5-year-old son speaks English, Portuguese and German, easily transitioning between all three. But even he, Lena laments, prefers to speak his native language of English. Lena says her job is to keep at him to form the muscle and speech memory of Portuguese and German. She knows that it takes practice and discipline to remain fluent in all of them. The same can be said for us in the church, those of us worshipping Jesus post-Pentecost. It's all too easy to just speak the language we're most familiar with; it takes discipline to expand our worldview, to learn the grammar and diversity of Pentecost. So, each year when we hear the Pentecost story, how do we let this message create in us the muscle memory of God's diverse family? How do we continue to proclaim the good news that all nations are one big family of God? What does it mean to let the Spirit draw us together, and speak through our differences?

Let's be honest, the Pentecost story is a bit crazy, it doesn't make a lot of sense, and there's so much going on that it's no wonder that Peter had to assure everyone else that those early Christians weren't, in fact, drunk. In fact, let's just put it out there: the Holy Spirit is the most confusing member of the Trinity. But despite the Holy Spirit's chaotic history—at Pentecost this Spirit creates a unique community among foreigners. The Spirit draws us close to one another, regardless of what language we speak or where we come from. And the Spirit gives us the power to understand each other.

Learning this new language of Pentecost takes discipline; it takes practice. So as we hear this story again today, as we remember the wild and wonderful narrative that it is, may we form the muscle memory to hear all the languages of God's children. Furthermore, may we seek to understand those who speak differently from us, knowing that God uses our own human speech to communicate the awesome love of Jesus.



In the power of that wild Holy Spirit, Amen.