

June 4, 2017 – Pentecost
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 2:1-21; John 20:1-12

Bambino

God can speak through any language. We had seven different languages represented in today's enlivened Acts reading, which may have felt like a lot, but was a mere fraction of the languages noted in the reading itself, the many different languages spoken by all these different people who gathered in Jerusalem long ago. You may have been surprised by what we did here today but it had nothing on that day when the rushing wind surrounded those gathered and its power alighted upon them all, and they all began speaking in different languages and all could be understood—because God can be understood, God can speak through any language.

This is one of the distinctive and astounding aspects of Christianity, says Lamin Sanneh, Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale. Sanneh was raised Muslim, but became a Christian as an adult. Sanneh notes that a distinctive feature of the Christian religion is that it does not require one learn a foreign language to access its holy scriptures. You do not need to know the languages that Bible was first written in to have access to its power. In fact, as best as we can tell, the New Testament itself was not first written in the language that Jesus spoke. So also, and always, the movement of Christianity is one of translation. Christian missionaries first learn the language of a people, learn the language native to a place, and then translate the Bible into that language. And then, as Sanneh points out—and what may be yet more astounding—when the Gospel is heard in the language people know, in a translation aware of a language's expressions and nuances and even idiosyncrasies, when Gospel makes its home in that language, it takes on and mobilizes its power, and new understandings are unleashed.

I remember catching glimpses of this when I lived in Tanzania. As I got to know its culture and people, as I learned and read the New Testament in a language of East Africa, Kiswahili, I would sometimes hear a Bible story, or a verse, in a whole different way, in a way that startled me with its vividness, with a depth and expansiveness I had not known before. Another pastor I knew and admire, now retired after spending more than twenty years as a missionary in West Africa and then in the U.S. for more almost two decades more, this pastor told me that even after returning to the U.S. he always began his sermon prep by reading the gospel in French. He said it helped him hear the gospel. French spoke to him with a melodiousness, and a lushness—and, no doubt, with memories of mission.

God can speak through any language. God speaks through all languages. The gospel is not dulled by translation, but rather reveals the multiplicity, the resourcefulness of the Spirit's power, long ago in Jerusalem, and here, too. Here in this country we have what may be the most astounding example of this in our nation's very DNA. In what can be a dark braid of our nation's history there is a gleaming strand; in the terror of chattel slavery there was a miracle: gospel, gospel music, spirituals, the melodies and the moaning, the faith of those in bondage. What astounding power there is, inherent in the gospel! That a people so abused could take the religion of the master and overseer, could take their religion, despite the way slave owners perverted it, and retranslate it for themselves. Those enslaved may not have been able to read or write, but their translation transcended mere literacy and spoke gospel truth: spoke freedom, and dignity, and hope.

I recently heard an incredible gospel message in another language, though I didn't so much hear it as watch and read it—I read the subtitles that translated this message into English, from Italian. It was a message from Pope Francis. I've heard of the many astounding, admirable, powerful things Pope Francis says and does, but I had never actually heard him, and I was a little surprised at how he sounded. For the most commanding person in the Catholic church, for a man on the world stage, of such impact on so many, he spoke in a rather modulated tone. He was not bombastic, nor self-aggrandizing. He did not raise his voice, nor jab his fingers to make a point. And it was mesmerizing—as it was for the rapt audience who listened to this message from the pope when it was first presented, via video feed, at the Vancouver TED2017 conference. Yes, Pope Francis gave a TED talk. Is that not something, to think of the pope speaking to a gathering of technology experts, innovators and activators, people of influence and means!? I highly recommend looking up the pope's TED talk online, as more than one and a half million people already have. What the pope said was so profoundly antithetical to a "Me first, why care about others, let earth's co-inhabitants fend for themselves." What the pope said was not spin, but a profound message of deepest truth.

Of its many moving, beautiful parts, one that stood out to me included a word in Italian that I actually know, the word, "bambino." Pope Francis said it several times, "bambino." You may also know that the word is Italian for "little child." Somehow "bambino" is just a better word, better captures the dearness, the vulnerability, the belovedness of a little child, like the little children in the two families who are joining our church today—each of the two families happens to have a set of twins (talk about the multiplicity of the Holy Spirit), and let's not to forget one set has an older sister, too! These families will all stand up here shortly, the parents and their bambini, and another new member, too, who is not bambino but has one here, she is the mother of our music director. But back to the pope's TEDtalk. Pope Francis used the word bambino as he talked about how he likes to hear a father, or a mother speaking to a bambino with a special voice, even a special language, a language of dear and tender tones. The pope always like to see and hear that, he said, because it reminds him of how God feels about us. We are God's bambino.

And not just that, even more than that, the Pope said, seeing a bambino also reminds him, not just of how God sees us, but how God comes to us. God Almighty, our source, and a force more powerful than our minds can fathom, God came to earth in the form of a child. In Jesus, God becomes a bambino. This, too, is how God speaks to us. In Jesus, God takes on the features, the nuances and idiosyncrasies of flesh. In Jesus God comes to us in our mother tongue. The incarnation is God's ultimate act of translation. The incarnation is God saying, "I speak your language." And yet more than this, the incarnation is the revelation of God's mother tongue. God can speak through any language. God speaks through all languages. But this is God's mother tongue: tenderness, one with us, solidarity, self-emptying love.

That is how God speaks to us, the Pope said, in the language of tenderness. And so also, we are urged to speak it. The pope said to this, to an audience of technopreneurs, the bigwigs, those who would lead, who would shape the future across the world. The pope said, especially those who have power must speak in this way: in the language of tenderness, in the language of service, in the language of self for others.

Speak it, all you, who have power, all you who have been that greatest power of all, the power of Holy Spirit, a power, as the scriptures tell us, that God gives to sons and daughters, young men and old, slaves, both men and women, Galileans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Irving Park Lutheran Church, you, me.