

May 20, 2018 – Pentecost
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Acts 2:1-21

Multilingual

How was it that everyone understood what the apostles were saying? That story from Acts that jumpstarted the church, when people from all different places gathered together and the apostles all began speaking at the same time, how was it they were understood? It must have been a jumble of sound; there were way more languages being spoken simultaneously than we heard today. It must have been very strange, even eerie, like the Bells' prelude today, and in effect similarly a verbal, it must have been hard to pick out single words. Yet somehow all these different people heard what the apostles were saying and understood it. More than that, the listeners didn't just get the gist, the biblical text says, makes a point of it, several times, that they heard what was being said in their own, their native, language.

How could that be? Stranger by far than tongues of fire atop a person's head, stranger by far is this miracle of Pentecost: this miracle of comprehension. This is not how communication works, as we usually think of it, how different languages are understood. You understand another language by studying it for years, reading and writing and speaking according to its grammar and vocabulary, maybe moving to another country. And then, even if one can, and does, acquire another language; even then that other language is considered a second language, is always in some way less near.

But that is how the gospel was heard. The people heard about God's deeds of power as in their native tongue. The apostles spoke the gospel in all different languages, but all heard it in their own language. Note that the different languages remained. The miracle is not that everyone started speaking one language. The miracle is that people who spoke different languages somehow understood one another.

That is a miracle: that people who are so very different from one another understand one another. How can that happen?

This is how it happened for the early church: this is what they said of the early church, this was its descriptor: "See how they love one another." Not, "See what big words they use." Or "See how long they speak." (Preachers, take note.) Not even "See how they answer all your questions." But "See how they love one another." That is how Jesus said his followers would be known, identified, would be understood, understood to be his disciples: by their love.

That is how it's possible to understand someone who is different from you, from a different place than you, maybe, it seems, from a different planet from you. They're not. There are no aliens on this earth God made. Because of Christ, there are no aliens, or strangers; all have been brought near to God. The Spirit, who once appeared as tongues of flame, makes it possible for us to hear one another in our native tongue, our first language, our primary language: love. The color of today, the color of the Spirit, is red: the miracle of the Holy Spirit is the miracle of love.

And love, as we know, isn't spoken only with words. Pastor and author Gary Chapman identifies five different languages of love, at least five different ways that humans say, "I love you,"—and only one of these five ways is verbal.

- 1) That's the love language that Chapman calls Words of Affirmation. Words of Affirmation is the love language that uses language, language as commonly understood, language as words you say, and a particular kind of words you say: encouragement, commendation, praise. Speaking aloud your appreciation for another person is a way of saying "I love you."

- 2) But so is putting yourself where your words are, the love language of Quality Time. That is, you say “I love you” to another person by being with them, by intentionally setting aside time to spend together. Your presence says you care.
- 3) So does what you do, Acts of Service, a third love language, not just doing something with someone, but doing something for someone. In acts large and small, service says “I love you.” You say this when you help another person out, give them a hand, serve, give what you do.
- 4) You can give actual, concrete things, too. This love language is often spoken on birthdays, and Christmas, but it can and should be spoken on other days, too, this fourth love language of Gifts. Gifts are another way of saying “I love you,” thoughtfully, lavishly, humbly, too—often the humblest gift is the most meaningful of all.
- 5) And finally, a love language that speaks to us creatures of flesh and bone, Physical Touch: embracing, holding, cuddling. With gentleness and generosity and mutuality and consent we touch the ones we love.

We can speak love in all these ways, as Jesus did. Jesus affirmed others (1): he blessed the poor in spirit, the meek and those who mourn; he told Peter he was a rock; he said to the Syrophenician woman that she had great faith. Jesus spent quality time (2) with people: all those years traveling with the disciples, all the time he took to be with so many other people: Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, all the times at table, including with outcasts and sinners. Jesus did acts of service (3): healings and exorcisms, footwashing, making food for crowds of people on numerous occasions. Jesus gave gifts, great gifts (4): on the night he was betrayed he said, this is my body given for you, and gives it to us still in the mystery of the sacrament—and Jesus was known to give really great wedding presents: barrels and barrels of the very best wine. Last but not least, Jesus touched people: he cradled little children, he reached out his hand to the sick and the suffering, he physically touched people whom others wouldn't: lepers, bleeding women, the demon possessed, people who were dying or dead. Jesus touched them, saying, I love you.

In these and so many other ways God says to us, I love you. God says it in multiple ways, to all different kinds of people, people of every nation under heaven. And then God sends the Spirit, and the Spirit speaks to us, and through us, through our words, and with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit calls us, gathers us, and enlightens us, sets us on fire to speak love, to speak love in words and presence and action and offerings and affection, to speak love in all the languages on earth, to be the church.