

“A church that speaks my language”

In a former church I was teaching an adult class next to the classroom for 6 year-olds. In the middle of our discussion some strange sounds emerged from the children’s room. First, there was a whooshing, whistling, roaring sound. A little while later, we were surprised by a loud babble of voices all speaking at once. Then the light dawned: “They must be acting out the birth of the church--- the first experience of Pentecost!” It was quite impressive, really—from our adjoining classroom they sounded exactly like I’ve imagined that first event might have sounded, when the Holy Spirit arrived and entered into the first Christian community. It was amazing.

Today we remember and celebrate that event. We need to grapple with its message, which reminds us that the church is called to speak many different “languages”.

That’s not always easy for us. Different languages make us nervous. We like what is familiar, what speaks to US. I’m not sure why human beings have so much trouble with differences, but let’s face it, we do. As a small child I felt uncomfortable in places that were unfamiliar to me. The auto repair shop was one I remember vividly. Our family had only one car, so when it needed work my mother would drive my father to his office, with my brother and I bundled into the back seat. Then we’d head over to the shop, where we’d all wait until the repairs were done. In that auto shop all the sights, sounds, equipment, machinery, smells and vocabulary were totally strange and foreign to me. I actually felt kind of scared. In all honesty, I still experience twinges of those old feelings when I take a car to be repaired—although I now face the additional fears about learning just what is wrong with my car and just how **costly** it will be to fix.

We don’t like what’s different--- and our problems with “speaking other languages” than our own can lead to more than expensive visits to the auto repair shop. Susan Resneck Pierce, President of the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, WA, alluded to this in her inaugural address:

When Coca-Cola went into China, they were determined to use a symbol that phonetically represented the sounds of their name. It was only after their marketing campaign was a failure that Coke learned their new

symbol translated, “Bite the wax tadpole”. When they changed their name to mean, “May the mouth rejoice”, they began to sell their product. When Chevrolet took the Nova to Latin America, they neglected the fact that the name meant, “Won’t go” in Spanish. Pepsi’s campaign in Taiwan translated the invitation to “Come alive with Pepsi” into “Pepsi brings your ancestors back alive from the grave.” Eastern’s “We earn our wings daily” promised in Spanish that passengers would arrive at their destination as angels. Parker Pen made even more extravagant claims in Flemish, asserting that their newly created leakproof cartridges would prevent unwanted pregnancies. But perhaps most stunningly, Frank Perdue’s slogan, “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken”, in Spanish announces that “It takes a virile man to make a chicken affectionate.”

These are pretty wild. But they underscore how amazing the Pentecost event was, and is, as the Holy Spirit sweeps through the church, providing the power and insight needed for many languages to be spoken and understood. The Holy Spirit is ONE entity. It is the Spirit of God. It is the Spirit of Christ. It is the Spirit of Love. These are all ONE AND THE SAME. Yet this ONE Spirit is manifested in many ways. As Rev. Leonard Sweet puts it, referring to the first Pentecost:

The Holy Spirit didn’t explode like some massive fireball, rolling over and consuming everything it touched. Rather, the Holy Spirit systematically differentiated itself into separate “tongues”. Each of these distinct manifestations, these separate licks of flame, then settled on and chose a unique individual upon which to rest. For the followers of Jesus, this was a “unified moment of ecstasy”—in that respect it was a “global” experience. Yet for each individual the experience was different. Each disciple received a different flame of that Spirit—and each disciple began to speak in a different language, until voice was given to all the tribes of the earth.

Many different expressions came from the people gathered that day, but all were familiar to some people present. The response of the crowd was, “Hey! They’re speaking my language!” People heard their literal language being spoken, and the images of that event were familiar to all who knew Hebrew Scripture. The “rush of a violent wind” brought to mind the image of God’s spirit moving over the waters in the first creation story. The tongues of fire

echoed the images of the burning bush experience of Moses, and the pillar of fire leading the Hebrews fleeing slavery in Egypt.

We are called to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our midst, so we can be, for each person who passes by, or stops to visit, a church that “speaks my language”. Not all of us will know how to speak each person’s language--- but that’s why God works through a whole COMMUNITY and not just one person. The Spirit provides various gifts to various individuals; we just need to allow room for the many languages to emerge—to be spoken. We need to pay attention to others who speak languages that are unfamiliar to us. You know, I don’t think Coca Cola, Pepsi, or Parker Pen or those other companies bothered to listen to any native speakers before they devised the translations of their slogans. I’ll bet, to clear up the problems they encountered, they finally realized they’d better do that!

We, in the church, need to do this also. The reality is that, in mainline denominations, we’ve had some trouble changing our ways so that folks will find the church a place that “speaks my language”. We may have done well with translating the Bible into many of the earth’s languages. However we also need to develop varieties of “languages” that emerge in our worship, in our ways of studying and learning, in experiences that bind us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to ask God to help us “speak” in ways that are meaningful to people from many generations and cultures and walks of life.

A survey of the United Methodist Church showed that in the ten years from 1986 to 1996, the percentage of older adults increased in our churches. In 1986 49% of church members were 50 and older. By the mid 1990’s over 60% of members were over 50. We are still moving in that direction, with nearly 70% of full members over the age of 50. Baker Memorial UMC is blessed to count better percentages—we do have a good mix of ages in our congregation. But still, even our reality suggests that our church life and activities are done in ways that communicate clearly to people 50 and older. We aren’t speaking the language of the younger generations as well.

I attended a lecture given by the Christian author, Philip Yancey. He talked about family members who do not participate in church, and how the younger generation is experiencing that. One boy, early elementary age, had his first experience of public worship, and was totally amazed by the congregational singing. He had been to concerts, and had experienced

presentational music many times. But he had never been in a big group of people all singing together. It was amazing to him, but also very strange and a little scary, different from anything he'd ever experienced. He didn't feel "at home".

Differences make us uncomfortable. But the story of Pentecost teaches us that they are necessary! The story of high-jumper Dick Fosbury illustrates this truth. Fosbury had a fear of leaving his feet. If his head went first, he felt safe. But when his feet left the ground first, he panicked. But even more than his fear of leaving his feet was his fear of appearing different. So he struggled to master "the way it's done" while experimenting privately with a different way of high-jumping. Many coaches mocked this strange quirk of his until Fosbury revolutionized his sport by jettisoning the feet-first Western Roll. Instead, he approached the bar at a 45-60 degree angle, turned his back on the bar, jumped in the air and vaulted over the bar headfirst. With this technique Fosbury got an Olympic gold medal, and "The Flop" as he method was called became a new standard high-jumping technique. Being willing to try something "different", something new, is part of moving forward along the path of life and faith.

I had a preaching professor in seminary who often told us to, "put your cookies on a lower shelf". He was continually after us to make all that we said and did understandable and accessible to as many people as possible—put the GOOD NEWS within reach of everyone! That's what Pentecost is about. That's a reminder we need to hear again and again. Without realizing it, we sometimes put the cookies, not only up on a high shelf, but locked away behind cabinet doors that require special keys to open.

Pay attention. Watch for people who seem confused as they come into our building- whether it's Sunday morning or a weekday at the church. Help people find their way around- whether it's finding a page in the hymnal or finding the way to the restroom. Be quick to introduce yourself, to invite others to sit with you. Invite people to your Bible study, to join you in a mission effort, to learn how to prepare a Lazarus House meal. Do this even if you have NEVER DONE IT BEFORE! Don't worry. We aren't alone. The Holy Spirit is in our midst, and equips various people in various ways to speak different languages.

The Holy Spirit can bind us together, motley bunch of folks that we are. We are called to be a church that speaks many languages, not simply to "market"

the church, not even to keep our denomination or local church alive, but so that the good news of God's love and power made known in Jesus Christ can reach, redeem, and transform the lives of every child of God. Let's invite the Holy Spirit to reveal to us our special language abilities. Let's listen to each other and respect each other---- and watch the fire of God's Spirit spread and burn brightly. Amen!