

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Translating the Gospel

Acts 2:1-21

I don't normally include videos in my sermons, but earlier this week, I came across one that we used in my worship time with the children in our day care ministry, and I thought it would be a good way to begin today's message as well (Play the video "Jesus Is Lord").

What's remarkable about that presentation isn't just that there are people from many different national, cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds joining together in the basic Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord," but that all of those people are part of one congregation, Good Shepherd United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. The fact that they're all in one church, worshiping the one Lord, and participating in the one mission of proclaiming the gospel, is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence and work.

This resembles another church I came across in some of my research. This one is First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas where, on any given Sunday, there are 15 to 20 different languages being spoken. Not at the same time in one service, but within each of the church's distinct international congregations. One of them is a Laotian group, whose pastor describes the overall picture of the church this way: "To me, God's kingdom is truly this way—we try here on earth first, how we can be in heaven. There's different nationalities there, why don't we practice here first?"¹

In today's Scripture passage from the book of Acts, Luke describes an experience that was not only practice for heaven, but actually a case of heavenly life itself, "power from on high" (Luke 24:49), descending into the gathering of Jesus' followers during the Pentecost festival in Jerusalem. Pentecost was a feast observed 50 days or seven weeks after Passover. It celebrated the harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses. According to Luke, this Jewish celebration became the occasion for a new bestowal of the Spirit of God through Jesus Christ.

Preacher Thomas Long tells about an occasion when he was teaching some children in a confirmation class. According to Long,

It was a very small group. In fact, there were only three young girls in the class. In one session, I was instructing them about the festivals and seasons of the Christian year, and when we came to the discussion of Pentecost, I asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. Since none of the three knew, I proceeded to inform them that Pentecost was "when the church was sitting in a group and the Holy Spirit landed on them like tongues of fire on their heads. Then they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the girls took this information in stride, but the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. I looked back at her, and finally she said, "Gosh, Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday."²

Though you and I couldn't be there either, we're still experiencing and living out the results of that moment in the story of the church. The boundary-breaking, barrier-crossing, church-uniting impact of the Holy Spirit is still being worked out in the life of God's people.

One of the keys to this journey of expansion from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, including Bryans Road, Maryland, has been language. Specifically, how to communicate the gospel in the language of particular people groups and cultures. That's how it began during the multisensory experience described in this morning's text. Though Luke notes the visual features of Pentecost, he especially stresses the audible aspects of the experience. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (v. 4). Note that Luke probably isn't referring to ecstatic speech, or what we often call speaking in tongues. Instead, he uses the word "tongues" in the sense of other languages. He goes on to say, "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language" (vv. 5-6).

Without the presence and work of God's Spirit, the disciples wouldn't have been able to proclaim the gospel the way they did, and those who were in Jerusalem for the festival wouldn't have been able to understand the gospel the way they did, in their own languages. Both the communication of the good news, and the comprehension of the good news, hinge on the activity of the Holy Spirit.

By enabling both speaking and hearing, the Spirit makes God's Word available and receivable in particular places, to particular people, in particular contexts. The gift of Pentecost is that you don't have to be a first century Jew living in the holy city, speaking Hebrew, in order to have access to the presence and power of Jesus. The good news of our Lord, and the reality of his kingdom, are translatable into the times, the locations, and the cultural settings, where we live, both locally and globally.

Seth Godin tells about how UNICEF spent a fortune creating posters aimed at mothers in Rwanda to raise awareness about the need for childhood vaccination. A friend of Godin's writes: "The posters were gorgeous—photographs with women and children with simple messages written in Kinyarwandan (the local language), about the importance of vaccinating every child. They were perfect, except for the fact with a female illiteracy rate exceeding 70 percent, words written in perfect Kinyarwandan made little difference." What soon became evident was that the way messages spread in Rwanda was by song. One group of women would sing a song for another group of women, both as a way of spreading ideas and as a gift. In other words, no song, no message.³

As followers of Jesus and witnesses for God's kingdom, we always have to pay attention not only to the message we communicate but also the medium in which we communicate it. For centuries, the message about Jesus has been spread into diverse cultures in diverse ways. Yes, there have been times and places where those who have gone forth to promote the gospel have been insensitive to or disrespectful of local cultures, have damaged or destroyed indigenous ways of life, and have carried out their ministry in ways that are inconsistent with the will and way of our Lord. But at the same time, so much of the labor to get the gospel out to the world has been genuinely enabled and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, showing us how to express the good news in local terms and local forms, without stampeding over people and places who have been made by God and redeemed by God in Christ.

The story of Pentecost reminds us that the God we worship and serve is a God who comes close and gets local. So close and so local that he came to us in human form through Jesus. God chose to use the language of incarnation in order to communicate with us, reveal himself to us, and give himself to us. So we shouldn't be surprised that following his life,

death, and resurrection, Jesus comes to us in an even fuller way through the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who takes the gospel and translates it in ways that make Jesus accessible to people from all national, racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. This God who comes so close, and works so locally, always has his eye on his great, global, cosmic project of bringing all people groups into one new humanity in Christ.

On that day in Jerusalem, when the Spirit came like wind and fire, we got a glimpse of what that new humankind would look like, similar to the testimony given in the book of Revelation, where the seer says: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the lamb" (7:9). That great multitude is still being formed as followers of Jesus take their cue from the Spirit and go further than they've gone before with the gospel.

In our case, that may not mean having to go very far. While the majority of the church's growth is now taking place on other continents, primarily Africa and Asia, it's also true that the world is coming, in increasing numbers, to America, particularly its cities. Our own congregation is part of an expanding metropolitan region made up of people from diverse international backgrounds who speak a wide range of languages. Combine this with the fact that our county, and our own local community, is racially and ethnically mixed, and you get an even stronger sense of how our church's long range mission is bound up with how we translate the gospel and make it visible in our life together as a congregation.

Since today's worship service will be followed by a fellowship meal with an emphasis on international dishes, I thought I would start to bring my sermon to a close with an illustration from the world of food. In this case, a salad. Author and professor Scot McKnight has written a book called *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together*. Early in the book, McKnight compares the church to a salad. He claims that there are three different ways to eat a salad, and each one reveals something crucial about the way that we conceive of the church.

The first way to eat a salad is what McKnight calls "The American Way." He says that according to this method, you "fill your bowl with some iceberg lettuce or some spinach leaves, some tomato slices and olives, and maybe some carrots, then smother it with salad dressing—Ranch or Thousand Island or Italian or, for special occasions, Caesar."⁴ The second way to eat a salad is what McKnight calls "The Weird Way." According to this method, you "separate each item in your salad around on your plate, then eat them as separate items. People who do this often do not even use dressing."⁵

McKnight claims that we've generally turned church into the American Way and the Weird Way. Under the American Way, we've smothered all difference in the church, just as we smother the salad with dressing so that it all tastes like dressing. In a similar way, the church can end up being designed more for one socioeconomic group, one culture, one race, one theology, without much room for difference. When we do church this way, says McKnight, we actually end up doing it the Weird Way. We tend to separate ourselves out from one another and form churches where most everyone is alike. We end up in segregated groups where we resemble each other in most categories.

But what about the third way of eating a salad, which McKnight calls "The Right Way." According to this method, you "gather all your ingredients—some spinach, kale, chard, arugula, iceberg lettuce (if you must)—and chop them into smaller bits. Then cut up some tomatoes, carrots, onions, red pepper, and purple cabbage. Add some nuts and dried berries, sprinkle some pecorino romano cheese, and finally drizzle over the salad some good

olive oil, which somehow brings the taste of each item to its fullest.”⁶ McKnight basically challenges us to think about how we as the church can be that salad bowl that holds all the difference together as one while still enabling each part to flourish in its own identity and uniqueness, somehow contributing to the good of the whole.

As Luke tells us, when many of those from a range of nations, cultural backgrounds, and languages heard the good news being proclaimed in their own native tongues, they asked that great Pentecost question, “What does this mean?” It means that the God who came to us and spoke our language in Jesus Christ has now come to us through the Holy Spirit, in the midst of all the challenges of our different nationalities, our different cultures, our different races and ethnicities, our different languages, and even our different foods. And the arrival of the Spirit doesn’t mean the flattening out or the elimination of our differences and our unique identities. Rather, it means that God meets us where we are, in order to save us and make us part of his people, so that we can be a living translation of the gospel to the world.

¹ Ebonie Graham, “Baptists Come Together Despite Language Barriers.” Amarillo Globe-News website. February 21, 2014. Accessed May 12, 2016 <<http://amarillo.com/news/local-news/2014-02-21/baptists-come-together-despite-language-barriers>>.

² *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (April-June 1996) 34.

³ Seth Godin, *Tribes (Portfolio, 2008)* 124.

⁴ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 14.

⁵ McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*, 14.

⁶ McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*, 14.