

May 23, 2010
The Day of Pentecost
Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21
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MULTILINGUAL

I'm one of them. I'm one of those Americans fluent only in English. I guess I'm monolingual. Sure I had a little Greek, a couple years of German, and a couple years of Spanish. I can still count and love to flaunt a few basic dialogues: *Hola, que tal? Bien, y tu? Me llamo Paco. Y tu, como te llamas? And: Wo is Monica? Im Boot mit Peter.*

But multilingual? No. When I was in Germany for my sabbatical several years ago and heard several sermons, I could not understand them, other than a *Jesu* here and a *Gott* there.

In the past decade the United States government has sought persons fluent in Arabic and other languages spoken in and around the Middle East. In dealing with the clash of cultures and the reality of terrorism, though, it takes more than finding the right meaning to a certain word. The linguist also needs to understand the values, beliefs, and customs of the other country or region.

If you've traveled around the world, you know the wonders and challenges of our multilingual human family. In 1951 the linguist Richard Pittman identified 46 languages of the world in his "ethnologue," as he called it. Today's 15th edition of *Ethnologue* documents over 7,000 languages, though about 500 of them are threatened with "language death" because they have fewer than 50 speakers.

Our liturgy today has a little multilingual flare. And two well-known readings today link the festival of Pentecost to languages and tongues, hearing and understanding. The ancient story of the tower of Babel tries to explain why there are different languages on earth. The people want to make a name for themselves so they build a tower high into the sky, an ancient skyscraper. But God confuses their language and they are no longer able to understand one another. Unity breaks down as the people are dispersed and cannot find the words to communicate. Multilingual chaos with no translators in sight.

The European Union has twenty-seven member countries with twenty-three official languages. Every session needs over 57 trilingual translators on hand. How easy it is to find someone to translate Finnish into Maltese?

In Acts we are told that devout Jews from every nation have converged in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection. The list of nations could almost sound like a roll call for the EU. At least fifteen ethno-linguistic groups are present. And then dramatic not-very-Lutheran things happen in their gathering. The rush of a violent wind. Tongues of fire.

And speaking in other languages. A multilingual eruption. It's not "speaking in tongues" as we think about it, which is usually not a real language. It's as if you were in a foreign country with no English speakers in sight, and you're in a great crowd, and suddenly you hear someone speaking, declaring the good news, in the language you understand.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit creates a new community. And such it is today. We may differ in language, race, ethnicity, social standing, worship style, politics or worldview. Yet there is another kind of language that unites us.

So I wonder: is the call of Pentecost to become multilingual? Oh, I don't mean simply to learn another language, though that would be pretty awesome. But to look at diversity—in the world, in this city, in the church, maybe even in our own personalities—not as something to fear, but as a gift to treasure, as something to desire.

Lutherans in the Metropolitan New York Synod conduct worship services in twenty languages. Holy Trinity doesn't seem a multilingual community.

But maybe we speak more languages than we think. Yes, we honor the Word and we use many words to speak about the one we call God. But by ringing the meditation bell, we proclaim that the Spirit also comes in silence, in emptiness, in waiting. Maybe Pentecost is inviting us to become more fluent in the language of silence.

We love music and we love to sing. Sometimes when the Spirit moves us so deeply, we need music to express the depth of feeling. When Handel's *Messiah* is performed later today, music will be our language to proclaim the wonders of our God revealed in Jesus the Christ.

Today we give thanks for the dreams and visions of this community over the past decade as we celebrate the conclusion of our Expansive Faith capital campaign. It has been a commitment to worship, music and hospitality that led many of you to speak the language of generosity. Through you, surely the Spirit has brought renewal and vibrancy to this community of faith!

What is the Spirit up to in this place? Where will the Spirit lead us next? What language will we use to communicate the good news of Christ to our neighborhood, to people longing for deeper meaning in their lives, to those in need around us? In the next year our congregation will begin such a discernment process, seeking to listen, understand and envision.

It amazes me to discover that some people are fluent in forty or fifty languages. A person who speaks multiple languages is called a polyglot. Pope John Paul II was fluent in ten languages. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was once asked which languages he typically used. "I speak Spanish to God," he said. "Italian to women, French to men—and German to my horse."

We are a people of the Word. But sometimes it is hard to find the words or the language to express the depth of our hearts—whether it be praise, or gratitude, or sorrow, or longing. As Paul tells us, the Spirit also speaks in sighs too deep for words. Sometimes there are simply no words.

And so we pray: Come, Holy Spirit. Set us on fire with your love. Send us forth, burning with justice, peace and love. The Spirit is alive in this place. The Spirit is a polyglot and now gives us a multitude of gifts to share. May God give us many new languages to sing praise and to proclaim all that God has done for us.