

Cat Goodrich  
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham  
May 19, 2018

Learning a Language  
Acts 2:1-20

When I first learned to speak Spanish, it wasn't in a classroom. In fact, I almost failed Spanish in college. I didn't learn until I had to – till it was sink or swim. I learned from listening, and talking – or trying to talk, on an itchy sofa in a tiny adobe house, watching telenovelas together with my host family. I learned on the bus driving through the highlands, and walking through the marketplace. Learning a language is a long process, one that for me, only happened when my desire to communicate overcame my fear of making mistakes. Students of a new language must be willing to become like children, learning to speak all over again. Little kids were my best teachers, because they weren't afraid to laugh and correct me. Learning a language requires a good sense of humor, even though jokes are often lost in translation.

The idea of a breeze bringing with it linguistic ability is delicious – something I longed for during seminary. I can remember tucking my Hebrew flash cards under my pillow before bed on the off chance that proximity would help, or learning by osmosis was really a thing. It isn't.

The sudden ability to communicate – and to be understood – is something we've probably all wanted at one time or another. Misunderstanding, miscommunication is all too common. Many parents have wanted a gust of wind to blow open their teenager's closed door and an angel to touch a live coal to their lips like Isaiah, putting the right words in their mouths so they might speak and be heard, when they live in the same house but don't even speak the same language anymore. ...words to let a sad or sullen child know that they are precious and loved – when arms are crossed and eyes are rolled and doors have been slammed and relationships are strained.

What teacher hasn't wanted to simply speak and not just be heard, but be understood?

This wind of words and understanding, is it not something every friendship, every marriage has needed on occasion? We are more connected than ever before, yet more people report feeling lonely and misunderstood. Even our closest relationships can be plagued by miscommunication.

There was a thread that broke the internet this week that proves two people can listen to the exact same recording and hear two very different words – raise your hand if you are a laurel – raise your hand if you are a yanny? It was the perfect meme for Pentecost, a strange commentary on speaking and hearing in our postmodern era. Because Pentecost was when each person in the street for the harvest celebration, people from across the vast Roman empire, people who spoke every language under the sun all heard the disciples speaking and understood, *in their own language!*

This is amazing! Even when we speak the *same* language, we can have a hard time understanding one another sometimes. But God's news of salvation and liberation is SO GOOD, and God's love for us is SO GREAT, that God comes to us speaking a language we can understand. God speaks to us in the words that shape our dreams – in our native tongue!

That, for me, is the message of Pentecost: the miracle that the creator of the universe reaches out to *us* and wants each of us to hear and believe the good news – that we are loved, we are forgiven, we are made new through Christ.

After his resurrection, Christ told the disciples to await the coming of the Spirit, who would tell them what was next. And on Pentecost, this motley crew of doubters and deniers gets remade into the pillars of the church. Leadership, vision, and voice are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, bestowed by a flaming wind. The Spirit at Pentecost is no descending dove or resounding silence. This is the ruach, the breath of God that moved over the face of the deep and blew the world into being, the wind that gave life to Adam and Eve and reanimated Ezekiel's dry bones! The Spirit comes at Pentecost like the plume of smoke and ash blowing out of Kilauea. It comes with the shaking of Krakatoa, to create a new thing once more. On Pentecost, the Spirit is on the loose, shaking the disciples out of hiding and pushing them out into the street to preach the good news so that all might hear and believe! On Pentecost, the ruach, the firey breath of God gave birth to the church!

That same Spirit is moving here this day, can you feel it? The Spirit has called leaders to serve and care and guide Old First into a new era, leaders God will bless and ordain and install to office today. The Spirit is shaking us out of the comfort of our pews and out into the aisles, and even into the street to speak the truth in love, that no matter the dividing walls we put up, we are made one in Christ Jesus – black and white, young and old, native born and immigrant, documented and undocumented, we are one in and through the God who made us, who is even now making all things new! It is such good news! And it requires a radical reorientation of the world as we know it. Because when we hear that news, in language we can understand, and we know it is for us, that God did this for us – then, we know what love is. And the Spirit drives us, giving us words and making it possible for us to share it: to love like we have been loved, because love is the reason for all of it – the only way to liberation, and justice, and wholeness, and salvation. We love, because God first loved us.

You know, love has a language all its own.

Gary Campbell is a pastoral counselor who wrote a book called the Five Love Languages. He observed in his work that one challenge people face in relationships – whether it's a marriage, or a family, or friendships - face is that people give and receive love differently. I may show my love for you with words of appreciation, but my mother gives gifts – it brings her joy to make something to give to someone else. We speak different love languages. She led a Chrismon project at my home church, sewing and

decorating ornaments for the Christmon tree much like Kit MacLeod has done here. It was an act of love. The knitting group here, knitting prayer shawls for those who are sick or otherwise in need of prayer – it's an act of love. Acts of service, words of affirmation, quality time, giving gifts, physical touch – all of these are ways that people express love. The trouble comes when I express love mostly in the ways I like to receive it – and it doesn't communicate the same thing to my friends, or to Dary, as I intend for it to, because they speak a different love language. They share and receive love differently. Love gets lost in translation.

What is your love language? What makes you feel appreciated and loved? How do you show love to those who matter most to you? For relationships to work, we need to learn to speak not just each other's language, but each other's love language. To do acts of service, or give gifts even if we're terrible at it, or offer verbal affirmation, even if it's awkward or doesn't come naturally to us. It helps to approach learning this new language like kids, with a willingness to laugh and make mistakes, trusting that the spirit is with us and will do its work of translation. What would it look like to learn to speak the love language of our families and friends in the church, or at work? of our neighborhood? The good news of God's love made known to us in Christ is too good not to share, and the message of Pentecost is that the Spirit equips and enables us to share it – to speak in language others can understand.

This summer will be the Summer of Love at First Presbyterian. For what it's worth, we'd decided on this over the past several weeks, but the sermon preached by the Presiding Bishop at the royal wedding yesterday was a beautiful affirmation of that choice, wasn't it! The world could use a little more love these days, couldn't it? Our neighborhood, our city, our communities are crying out for love, aren't they? So we're going to share some. We're going to look at stories in scripture that tell us something about love, and then we're going to show our love for one another and the city through random acts of kindness, and again and again and again we are going to hear until we understand and believe that we are blessed and beloved children of God, saved through the love of Christ, called to share that love with others. Thanks be to God. Stay tuned...