

In Our Own Tongue Acts 2:1-13

It pays to know the language of the people to whom you're speaking. A Latin American minister was touring the U.S. in an effort to boost financial support for missionaries and ministries in his home country. At a church luncheon, he was telling the guests about his home country, his family, and the important work being supported there.

He concluded by saying, "And I have a charming and understanding wife but, alas, no children. You see, my wife is unbearable." Puzzled glances in the audience prompted him to try to clarify by saying: "What I mean is, my wife is inconceivable." When he was made aware of his wording, he had a good laugh, too.¹

Of course, with our many dialects, even within this land it is sometimes difficult to understand people of different regions. A New Yorker visited the home of a Kentucky business colleague. The wife introduced him to their lovely little daughter. "Her name is Marlon," said the proud mom, "after ma favorite movie star." The New Yorker asked, "You named your daughter after Marlon Brando?" "No silly," said the mom, "ah named her after Marlon Monroe."²

It helps if you can speak the language of the person with whom you are speaking. That's one of the things that I love about the story of the first Pentecost. All of these people, from different parts of the globe, all understanding the message of God in their own language.

Think about what a moment that must have been. Think about how difficult communication is, even among those who speak the same language, in the same family, in the same house. Communication is difficult even among people who share the same experiences.

How many couples bemoan the fact that they've "lost the ability to communicate." And here in our lesson, on the day of Pentecost, we have people across a spectrum of languages, nationalities and experiences understanding these simple, plain, humble messengers of God. There's so much we can learn from the first Pentecost.

First of all, we learn that **the Christian faith is a universal faith**. People from differing nations understood the Gospel message -because, for one thing, the message was meant for all nations and all peoples.

We, like all people, are somewhat ethnocentric. Ethnocentric is a fifty-cent word that means we think everybody on earth ought to be like us, look like us, talk like us, think like us, act like us. And we think God ought to favor us. After all, we're a Christian nation. At least in our own minds we are. I wonder what God thinks of us . . . really.

It shocks us when we realize that God is a universal God. Intellectually we understand that, but at a more basic level we want God to be like us. Surely God speaks English. Surely God has American values. Surely God, if a registered voter, would vote for our candidate.

¹ Mikey's Funnies, <http://www.agathongroup.com/>.

² *The Jokesmith* (Marlborough, MA: www.Jokesmith.com, Volume XXIV number 4, 2008), p. 2.

And then we meet a Christian from Africa, or Asia, or Europe, and they have very different ideas about God, and we're surprised and caught off guard. We thought we had God in a box, and then realize that we've made our God too small!

There are Christian people in almost every nation in the world who see the world through the lens of their culture and think their way is the best way. God must have a good laugh at our provincialism.

God is a universal God who is Lord of the Chinese and the Congolese, of the Iraqis and the Afghans, of the Canadians and the Americans, of New Yorkers, Kentuckians, and yes, even Californian's. God has no favorites, but favors justice and righteousness and compassion and love wherever those characteristics are found.

What God seeks is the day when all of us know His love and peace, and understand that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. The Christian faith is a universal faith.

The second thing we learn is that **God comes to us just as we are**. People from these many nations heard the Gospel spoken directly to them in their own language. Whoever we are, wherever we are in life, God speaks our language.

We don't have to have a college degree to hear God speak to us. We don't have to speak English. We don't even have to speak or hear at all. God's language is the language of the heart.

We dare not think that God speaks only to the sophisticated or the learned among us. God speaks to everyone, the smart, the dumb, the sophisticated, the simple, the privileged, the powerless; God speaks to us where we are. And while that's true of our intellectual differences, it's also true of our personalities.

Some people are quite easy going. They get along with everybody and nothing ever seems to ruffle them. Some people are very particular; they want everything done just right. Some people are party animals energized by being around others. They like the limelight and make every event they participate in more enjoyable. Some people like being in control. They're rather impatient with those who are not as action oriented as they are.

I heard about a woman who liked being in control. She made life difficult for her husband, Tom. The scary part was that she had become so domineering that Tom insisted she see a psychiatrist.

After much pleading, much to Tom's surprise, she finally agreed to go. And for two hours, while she was in the psychiatrist's office, Tom had peace and quiet, and was master of the remote control.

When she returned home Tom asked, "How did it go? Was it helpful?" And she replied, "I'm not sure. It took most of the hour to convince the doctor that the couch would look a whole lot better on the right side of the door instead of the left."³

People are different. That's the way God created us. It's in our genetic code. We're different emotionally and intellectually. I'm convinced that God speaks to engineers differently than He speaks to artists. Engineers need all the nuts and bolts, the whys and hows of faith. Artists need to feel the breeze, smell the flowers, find the rainbow, touch the fabric of faith.

³ James E. Myers, *A Treasury of Husband and Wife Humor* (Springfield, IL: Lincoln Herndon Press, Inc, 1994).

The point is that God comes to us where we are, speaks our language, and meets our needs. And God uses different means to speak to us according to those needs.

In worship, some people respond to scripture, others to the liturgy, others to music and a scarce few to the sermon. That's because people are different. But God comes to us all, individually while we're all together in this place.

The last thing we learn in this passage is that **this is what the incarnation is all about**. We can't separate Pentecost from the resurrection. In Christ God entered the world to draw close to humankind . . . to reveal His nature . . . to help us prepare for the kingdom.

God came to us at Christmas in the form of a child; God came to us at Pentecost in the form of the Holy Spirit – in both times speaking our language so that we might know Him and have life through Him. Our mission now is to translate the Gospel for our friends and so that they can know God as well.

There are people in our community waiting to hear the Gospel in a language they can understand. We dare not wait for them to learn the language of the steeple, using words like incarnation and transfiguration. Those words mean nothing to lost souls.

We need to translate the Gospel into words and acts that no one can misunderstand. Words and actions that communicate love, compassion, forgiveness and acceptance. God has met us where we were. Now we must go and meet his people where they are, speaking in their language the words of our risen Savior. Amen.