

Pentecost Sunday – June 4, 2017 – Acts 2:1-21
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A few weeks ago, right before leaving on my trip to Ireland and Scotland, I had an appointment with my dentist who told me funny story. He plays on a local curling team, and about a year or so ago, a curling team from Scotland came to the States for a tour and to play local teams. While the Scottish team members were in Wausau, they stayed with the families of the local players. After conversing with their guests for some time, my dentist's wife asked the players what their native language was back in Scotland, because their accents were so unique.

Now let that sink in a minute. What is the language of Scotland? Right, English. But their accents and pronunciations were so different than what she was used to hearing and they used words that she was not used to hearing in casual conversation, she had a hard time believing they actually spoke English.

On my trip, the tour guides we had were very easy to understand. They had to be, as it was there job. Our bus drivers were a little harder to understand. But I especially noticed the language differences when I was trying to have a conversation in a grocery store with an older woman who lived in the Scottish Highlands. I had to listen very carefully to what she was saying. I had to focus on every word so that I could understand her correctly. Even though we spoke the same language, I had to really listen to what she was saying so that I could understand her.

As I have traveled around the world over the past decade, especially to areas where English is not the native language, I have discovered this need to really focus on what is being said in order to have any understanding of the content. Pointing and gesturing is also very helpful. I have also discovered the frustration that comes when the messages between individuals is not being understood. When the language barrier is too high, sometimes a smile, a shake of the head, and a shrug of the shoulders is all we can manage.

There was a time in Mexico on a mission trip that I was speaking with the pastor's wife. She couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Spanish. She kept saying, what I thought was the word, "pink." And I would respond, "Rosa? Rojo? Red?" and point to something that was red in color. And she would shake her head and say, "No. Pink. Pink." Clearly we were not understanding each other. Then finally she made the sound "oink, oink, oink!" and the lightbulb went on above my head, and I exclaimed, "Pig! You mean pig!" and she said, "Si!! Pig, pig!" and we started laughing, relieved that we finally understood each other.

So as I was thinking of the story of Pentecost this week, my focus kept going to the part about the disciples speaking the gospel in the native languages of the people around them. With the advent of the Holy Spirit, who came in on a rushing wind, almost tornadic in its power, the Spirit gave the disciples the ability to share the message of Jesus Christ to others, despite their language barriers. They went rushing out into the street, full of excitement and energy, with not only the desire, but also the means of sharing the good news with everyone. Imagine trying to share the message of God's love, grace, and mercy to others when you do not speak the same language. It seems an impossible task, yet the intent of this story of Pentecost is to show that the gospel of Christ transcends communication barriers.

But language itself is not the only barrier we face. Sometimes, as my trip to Scotland last week demonstrated, even when we speak the same language as someone else, we may not be communicating. And that led me to think about the issues we are currently facing in our country at this time in history. We may, for the most part, speak the same language, but there is an inability to communicate. There is a lot of talking going on, but not much understanding.

Just last night a Baptist friend of mine posed a question on his Facebook page, about how to find the facts of a particular hot button situation when opposing sides are saying very different things. One man made a comment sharing a particular source. I made a comment pointing that that source was skewed to an extreme belief system. Immediately that person, who I don't know, attacked my comment and attacked me personally for making it. My response was incredulity. I called him out for his unwarranted personal attack.

And as I have already mentioned, when there is a lack of understanding between different individuals or groups, frustration sets in. Frustration and the inability to speak the “same language” has created barriers between people. And where there are barriers between us, how can we begin to communicate? How do we share the message of God’s incredible love for all people? How do we share God’s unending mercy to us, despite our unworthiness? Or how do we share God’s amazing grace that gives and keeps giving? When words fail to communicate, we can demonstrate the message of the gospel in our actions. We can communicate what we say through what we do.

If we say that God is love, we must share that love. If we say that God is gracious, we must share that grace. If we say that God shows mercy in forgiveness, we must extend the hand of mercy with others. That doesn’t mean that we back down from what we believe, if what we believe aligns with what we have been taught in scripture. But it does mean we extend a hand of willing openness to communicate. And if that communication is spurned, so be it. Our actions will always speak louder than any words we say.

The Pentecost story is an odd one. It tells of God’s powerful Spirit descending on the unsuspecting disciples in a rush of wind and fire. And then that same Spirit sends them out into the world, to communicate the message of the gospel, where once communication was impossible due to barriers of language and understanding. But God’s message of love is always a universal message. It does not belong to one single group, and it is not bound by our limits of language and understanding. The message of the gospel transcends all barriers, and with God’s Spirit pushing us forward, we can be messengers of that gospel. Friends, may it be so.