

“You’re Speaking My Language”

If knowledge is power, then language is the perfect power conductor. Language defines, and the power to define, to name, is the power of creation. We tell the truth with language. We tell a lie with language. We create understanding, we confuse comprehension with the language we use.

This isn’t to say that there isn’t some truth that is out there beyond us, but it is to confess that the words we use can do good and can do evil. Sticks and stones may break our bones, and names can deeply hurt us.

Our Muslim brothers and sisters are keenly aware of this. They know that something is lost in translation; for them, a translation of the Koran is not the holy Koran; something essential is missing when the words are no longer in Arabic; the text is no longer the word of Allah; it’s a human word, a word spoken in our language, and that distorts the truth. Therefore, they stick the original Arabic and conform to God’s language.

Pentecost presents a very different approach, an approach that offers us hope as we seek to bear witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ. Our goal in 2012 is to grow our church; we believe these bones can live, and that means getting to know different people who speak different languages; languages we need to learn; languages we need to include in our life together.

Now, all this talk about “speaking our language” requires a clarification as to what “language” is; it’s more than words, grammar, and syntax. A picture is worth a thousand words; so is a math equation; language is what we use to communicate meaning. So when we watch our language, proper parsing isn’t enough. One study on communication I share with pre-marital couples suggests that words only communicate 8% of the meaning. 38% of the message is communicated with our tone. 54% of the message is communicated with body language.

We have a lot to learn, and Pentecost offers us hope. Pentecost marks the birth of the Church; it’s a miracle of New Creation. The promise of Easter is fulfilled on Pentecost. Jesus said, “You will receive power,” and Pentecost provides power a plenty.

“You’re Speaking My Language”

This Pentecostal power is conducted through language, but this is where the New Creation surprises us; it surprised me this week.

Previously, when I thought about Pentecost, I thought about how people were brought together. A new unity was created that transcended all the divisions. The problem of difference was “solved” by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. God doesn’t “solve” human differences; God indwells them; God speaks through them. In this sense, God inspires them.

Luke takes us to one of the great Jewish festivals, the Feast of Weeks, that celebrated the spring harvest and had come to celebrate the giving of the Law. Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the Greco-Roman world; Parthians and Medes and Elamites (Oh my!); Different people from different places who speak different languages came together in Jerusalem to keep the feast.

The crowd comes together and the Spirit moves. *Acts 2:6–8 (NRSV) And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”*

I thought differences didn’t matter, but notice that Elamites hear the good news in Elamite; Medes in the language of the Medes; Parthians in the language of the Parthians. The Spirit was speaking in their language!

Difference isn’t erased; it is embraced! Conformity isn’t imposed, nor is it expected. God doesn’t demand that we learn God’s language; God loves us so much that God speaks our language.

In so doing, God illustrates what the New Creation, the Church, is like. It is diverse. Different people from different places (and that includes different places in life) who speak different languages are gathered by God. God doesn’t set a standard to which we must conform; God offers an embrace which we can receive.

“You’re Speaking My Language”

God knows, we in the Church have often fallen short of this vision! The Church’s record as a despot that devastated deviance is written in volumes of blood from the Crusades to the Inquisition to the Holocaust and on and on.

We can’t undo what was done, but we can learn. We can use different language. Two quick illustrations of the power of this different path:

This week’s *Presbyterian Outlook* reported that “the Presbytery of Yukon has formally apologized to the Alaska Native residents of Gambell, Alaska – a Yu’pik village on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea 36 miles from the coast of Siberia – for a now discredited mission policy that sought to stamp out native language and culture as part of the church’s evangelization efforts in Alaska....

A handful of elders remembered suffering physical punishment – such as swats with a yardstick – for speaking their own language.... “We were told our drum and dance were evil, and it was almost a prerequisite to become Western to be a Christian.”¹

We can’t undo what was done, but by the power of the Spirit we can have the courage to recognize when we are wrong, to say that we are sorry, and to model the humility that works to set things right; humility that begins by speaking their language.

Thursday’s webinar about South Sudan told a different mission story: Sharon Curry, a Presbyterian missionary in South Sudan described her evacuation from Juba to flee the tribal violence. She was evacuated to Molokal, a city in which 7 different tribes who speak 7 different languages live together.

While in Molokal, she struggled with the languages, but learned to wear a lual; a simple piece of cloth worn by Sudanese women. Each tribe tied the cloth differently. It was one of the ways they defined themselves, so when she didn’t wear a lual, she heard about it in 7 languages. The women told her that her wearing a lual represented her embracing their culture, their

¹ Jerry L. Van Marter, “Agents of reconciliation.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*. (May 28, 2012). 07.

“You’re Speaking My Language”

way of life. It showed she spoke their language.

After the tribal violence that resulted in the burning of Pibor and many other atrocities, Sharon’s credibility was vital in making peace. Murle Christians wrote a letter to Nuer Christians to seek reconciliation and asked Sharon to be the courier. In return, Nuer Christians wrote a gracious response which Sharon also couriered, and a fragile peace was made. She was able to be an agent of reconciliation and peace because they knew she spoke their language.

Someone once said, “People won’t care how much we know until they know how much we care.” We communicate that caring with our language. We communicate it by learning their language.

God speaks their language. The power of Pentecost continues to flow! God doesn’t set a standard to which we (or they) must conform. God offers an embrace to us all; God invites us to offer that embrace in a world that continues to define by difference.

Our goal is to grow in 2012. These bones will live when we stop demanding conformity and start embracing differences; we will be a New Creation when we allow the Spirit’s power to flow through us; instead of expecting people to learn our language and our ways, we learn their language and their ways. Our church will grow when different people who speak different languages know that we care; they know that because, “You’re speaking my language.” Amen.