

2020 05 30 Pentecost Num 11 Ps 104 Acts 2 John 7
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Sundays and Seasons is a worship resource website I consult most weeks. I smiled when I read this suggestion for Pentecost: “Since most of our ministry contexts do not have speakers of a dozen different languages, ascribe a language to a musical instrument....” It went on to suggest different instruments to represent linguistic diversity.

At the risk self-congratulation, I am happy to note we came up with 12 languages in and on the edges of First Lutheran, with little difficulty. The marvellous multilingual reading that we just had is a sign of many things, including the privilege it is to live in a city like Toronto.

It also points to the rich symbolism of language and its connection to identity and self-worth. Many of you who were reading today, were reading in your mother tongue, or one of your mother tongues. Pause for a minute and reflect on what that experience signifies, and why, the miracle of all these foreigners in Jerusalem hearing Jesus’ followers speak in their own languages matters so much.

First, as you read, I could hear a sense of pride of place, of being heard and being known either for a part of your identity that isn’t always celebrated or recognized, or because of your ability to use a foreign language as a result of much effort and study.

As an aside I would note that we heard versions of three languages: Latin, Greek and Farsi that would have been spoken by those religious pilgrims in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. Nice touch eh?

But when we are able to speak, be spoken to, or hear our mother tongue, especially perhaps in worship there is something deeply psychological and spiritual at work. Our adult worldviews were given shape by the first vocabulary we learned as children, and as such our mother tongue, or tongues are part and parcel of our identity, and as such a source of pride. For many of us the stories of faith came to us as children. So identity, faith, self-worth and language are intertwined.

But our languages can be used against us, as a weapon. In many times and places not speaking the dominant language, speaking a foreign language or speaking with an accent is a source of ridicule or shame. As a pre-schooler on the farm in Saskatchewan I was a fully bilingual little boy, switching back and forth with ease between German and English, so much so that I didn't really always distinguish between them. One time one of our English neighbours came to the farm looking for my Dad. I told the neighbour that my dad was in the cattle shelter, "he's at the Bude," I said, using the German word. The neighbour had no idea what I was trying to say, and I didn't know how else to explain it, but eventually he sauntered off in the direction I was pointing and found my Dad. Later, after the neighbour was gone, Dad was furious with me, "Don't ever speak German to the English neighbours!" Dad had been humiliated by the fact that I didn't speak proper English and I in turn learned the shame and stigma associated with our language and ethnic identity at a time when the memory and trauma of the Second World War was less than two decades old and quite fresh.

For most of us, I think it's a source of pride to sit in a subway car and hear multiple languages around us. We celebrate Toronto's diversity, and might even tend to self-congratulation at this richness, tolerance and equity.

But rejoicing at other languages and identities around us is not a universally held value: four Cuban friends of mine, two couples who were living in Toronto as visiting scholars were once enjoying a social night out, travelling back to their apartments when someone on the subway took offense that they were enjoying themselves speaking Spanish and spat on them, with the intention to hurt. Seven lovely years in Canada, will always be marred by the memory of being hatefully othered on the TTC, just for speaking a native language - that was not English - among friends, in a public space.

Why would that hurt so much? Because language, identity and indeed faith are so inextricably intertwined.

The thing all those foreigners in Jerusalem were so amazed about was the experience of being honoured and respected because the disciples could tell them the gospel in their own language.

Short story: language and identity are key to our sense of self-worth, and as such can be used to affirm someone, or shame and denigrate someone. The fact that the first gift of the tongues of fire and the rush of a mighty wind was tongues of another kind: multilingual understanding and respect should tell us something.

By corollary it tells us that all our other markers of identity: sexuality or gender, racialization and ability, are likewise sources of pride or derision, life-giving, or as we saw again last week, in the heinous murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, cause for victimization and death. Pentecost celebrates difference and calls us to resist all forms of “othering” be they based on race, class, ability or any other marker. The riots and demonstrations all over North America are a spirit led cry for justice.

The other readings for Pentecost amplify the ineffable richness of the Holy Spirit: a key point from Numbers 10 is generosity in the Spirit: in the context – and I assure you the entire chapter 10 of the book of Numbers is a fun read – everyone is grumbling about scarcity and privation. The children of Israel are grumbling because they’ve been eating the same old manna in the wilderness for weeks – kinda like the Biblical version of COVID19 lockdown – and Moses is grumbling to God, because he’s tired of leading grumpy people. So God pours out so many quail that food will be coming out their noses – yes that what it says! God pours out the Spirit on 70 new leaders to help beleaguered old Moses. Then Moses’ protégé, Joshua, is grumpy and jealous because two otherwise unknowns, Eldad and Medad are also filled with the Spirit. Takeaway message: no need for a theology of scarcity when it comes to Spirit! And no reason for hoarding during the physical distancing of 40 years in the Wilderness... only another 39 years to go. God will provide. Think about it. Remember, with awe, that God is more generous of Spirit than we can fathom.

The Psalmist today echoes God’s generosity of spirit with the celebrated passage: “All eyes wait upon thee O Lord, and thou givest them their meat in due season; thou openest thine hands, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing” to cite the KJV. I am particularly partial to this passage because when I was Gregor’s age, [Note: Gregor was the boy who read the German text in Act 2] shortly after I had the unfortunate conversation with our English neighbour,

the one and only time my father took his Bible to teach me scripture from memory it was this passage: “Aller Augen warten auf dich Herr, und du gibst Ihnen ihre Speise zu deiner Zeit. Du tust diene milde Hand auf und sätigest alles was da lebt mit wohlgefallen.”

But even more than food, is the breath of **life** itself, which is God’s spirit within us, until God withdraws it and we are called home, to return to the dust from which we came.

In addition to Spirit as fire, wind, and breath there’s Spirit as Water! Today in John’s Gospel long before his crucifixion and ascension Jesus says the promised Spirit will be a River of Life. The quizzical thing about this short gospel is the phrase, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.” The “his” here is ambiguous in English and in Greek: it could mean when the Spirit comes, “rivers of living water” will flow out of Jesus’ heart, or out of the believer’s heart. I like the tension and ambiguity which would fit nicely into a Semitic world-view I think. Let just say it’s both.

Dreams and visions are the other Pentecost blessing: Your sons and daughters... shall prophesy, see visions... dream dreams. In the face of a pandemic with no end in sight, and neighbourhoods on fire or under curfew because of prophetic protest, the Twitter greeting from the World Council of Churches today rings true: “The church was born in tumult yet emerged from the chaos with a potent, and indeed life-changing, message relevant to all cultures and contexts. As at the First Pentecost so it must be again today.”
AMEN.

Images for Spirit:

Fire (Acts)

Wind (Acts)

River of Water (John)

Breath (Psalm)

Gifts of the Spirit

Shared leadership and no theology of scarcity: Numbers

The breath of life (Ps 104)

Visions and dreams, language and reciprocal understanding (Acts)

Life abundant – Communion with God and the Eternal Logos (John)

What's at stake in these texts?

Numbers: Moses doubts his leadership and the people are tired of being in the wilderness and eating the same manna every day (tired of COVID19 isolation?) and God responds with a richness of spirit and a new diet: so much that it would come out of their noses.

Psalm: Everything we have comes from the breath of God (the Voice) including our life and our death.

Acts: The divisions created by Babel will be transcended by the Holy Spirit – wind and fire. And we will become a people propelled by visions and dreams – a consecrated imagination.

John: the River of Life flows out of his heart: simultaneously out of the believer's heart and the heart of Christ. A great Semitic holistic image.

Context:

My childhood recollection of Psalm 104

George Floyd

COVID19