

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 104:24-34

Acts 2:1-21
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

We need Pentecost. So asserts Keri Day, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. She claims that Pentecost was about a miracle of community. Let's take a look at the original event of Pentecost to understand what she means.

Forty days after Easter, Jesus ascended into heaven. Before he ascended, Jesus instructed the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. They go to Jerusalem, where Jews from all around are also gathered. Many Jews had come to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage for it was time of a religious festival. When the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples, they began to speak in other languages. The Jews from all over the world hear the disciples speaking in the native languages of these Jews. This was not speaking in tongues, where people speak in incoherent language, what we may think of as Holy Rollers. We had a Holy Roller in the first church I served. It was the mimeograph machine! No, these were the recognizable languages of the people. None of these disciples could have known the mother languages of all these Jews gathered. It would have been too long and arduous process for the disciples to learn the languages. Note that it was not a new language that everyone had to learn to be a part of this new community. Nobody was demanding that everyone speak in English or whatever was the language of the land. Rather, it was a community made up of many different languages. The gathered crowd was left wondering how all of this is possible. It was strictly an act of the Spirit. It was a miracle. It was the miracle of Pentecost.

Languages do divide people. In 1492, a bishop presented to Queen Isabella his book. It was a text book on the grammar of the Spanish language. No other European country had a textbook for their language. It would have been seen as foolishness.

When Queen Isabella received the book, she was confused, puzzled. The bishop explained, “After your Highness has subjected barbarous peoples and nations of varied tongues, with conquest will come the need for them to accept the laws that the conqueror imposes, among them will be our language.” 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Spain was in the midst of colonization. Colonialism involved imperial control through a common vocabulary, a single tongue, the language of the conquerors.

At Pentecost we see the opposite of what the bishop and the Queen imagined: a world of many tongues. God affirms the native languages of all the peoples. “The crowd...was bewildered,” it says in our Acts reading, “because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” For God, there is no imperial tongue, there is no official language. The Holy Spirit speaks through all languages. Every language is holy.

Yet we use language to divide us, to declare the superiority of one language over another. We may denigrate the language of others. A more personal example for me about how those who speak a different language have been coerced to give up their language is the Deaf community. In 1880, at the infamous Congress of Milan, which met in Milan, Italy, declared that the deaf were to be educated only by oralism, by teaching speech and lip reading. What that meant in the United States was that American Sign Language was forbidden in schools for the deaf. I have a door in the basement of my house that has nine panes of opaque glass that used to hang in a classroom at the Iowa School for the Deaf in Council bluffs, Iowa. In the center of those nine panes, the opaque pane was removed, and replaced with a clear pane. The school authorities would walk up and down the halls, looking through these clear panes for any teacher

using ASL. Any teacher caught using ASL was fired immediately! Nebraska, in 1911, passed a law declaring that deaf children should be taught only by lip-reading. In other words, ASL was literally illegal to use to teach deaf children. That law was not repealed until 1977. Leaders believed that Deaf people needed to be like everyone else, to be able to communicate in English. Even today doctors who perform cochlear implants, will tell parents not to teach their children ASL, for it will make the children dependent upon ASL. That's like telling someone not to learn a language, for then they will become dependent upon it! People signing were just too different!

Pentecost invites us into a new way of engaging with differences—not just with different languages, but with all the ways we are marked as different from one another, whether it is the color of our skin, our gender, our race, our nationality. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit speaks through the differences, without converting them into sameness. People aren't invited to give up their languages, their cultures, and convert to the same way of speaking and thinking. God created diversity and we are to celebrate diversity, the diversity blessed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Yet, we live in a society that ignores, or worse yet, demonizes those who are different from us. Last week I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Why do I have to dial 1 for English?" Immigrants are represented as criminal, lazy, and dangerous. People who are American citizens, but who look different than the white western European, have been threatened to "Go home," "Go back to where you belong." White pastors often suggest from pulpits that African Americans in urban areas are responsible for whatever injustices befall them because of their own sins, both personal and social. LBGTQ people continue to be vilified.

Dr. Day shares about the Pentecostal Church of her childhood. Her father was a Pentecostal pastor. Every year the most dramatically staged biblical story in her church was the story of Pentecost. They loved reciting these words from the Pentecost story: "And they were gathered together in one accord." That line communicated what was sacred in that church, a strong sense of community, an unbreakable bond of living with and loving each other. It sounds like this church and many other churches. You have a strong bond, a strong sense of community. You are a community that shares the joys, shares the concerns, the grief, the pain, of our members. You respect the differences. You provide an American Sign Language interpreter for those who use ASL. You have straight, and you have gay. Unfortunately, like most churches we are a rather homogenous community. That is, we are all mostly of one race. But we do have people of different races, and I hope the diversity increases. Why? Because that is how God created us. We are different.

Pentecost offers us a different way, where the Spirit affirms differences. That is how the day of Pentecost ends, with all these strangers eating together: "So those who welcomed [the] message were baptized [and] they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer,... they broke bread from home to home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts."

Will we allow our voices to speak a language of good news that can be heard by all people, especially those who are vulnerable, those who are treated as second-hand citizens simply because they are different?

All authority and power and dominion
to the name that is above all names—
Jesus Christ our Lord—
now and in the age to come. **Amen.**