

THE LANGUAGE OF HOME

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Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

“And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”

Acts 2:8

There was a little wedding yesterday in Windsor, England. Maybe some of you got up early and watched it on TV.

Central to the ceremony — as is often the case at weddings — there was a sermon. Prince Harry and his bride, Meghan Markle, heard an Episcopal Bishop from the United States speak to them about love. That’s usual for a wedding sermon, but what was not so usual is that the whole world was watching.

Michael Curry is not just any bishop. He’s the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. I think he acquitted himself rather well in preaching the gospel, succinctly and with an engaging warmth.

Afterwards, there was a sort of post-game interview with Bishop Curry, and with the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was like one of those play-by-play examinations you often hear after a football game. It was kind of refreshing to see all that media attention lavished on a sermon!

The Bishop spoke to the happy couple about fire. He used a famous quotation I shared with you a couple of weeks ago — from the French Jesuit theologian and scientist, Teilhard de Chardin:

“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, [the human race] will have discovered fire.”

Teilhard wasn't exactly right about that, because there was another occasion, between paleolithic times and the hoped-for future of Christ's return, when the human race discovered — or rediscovered fire. It was on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples were huddling together in fear, when tongues of fire appeared over their heads, and suddenly they discovered that they could understand other languages.

Communication across human languages is always a chancy thing. I remember, nearly twenty years ago, making a visit to the Presbyterian Church in Cuba as part of a mission partnership my presbytery had established. One day, I was wearing a red sportshirt that nearly got me into trouble.

It was an ordinary polo shirt, with a stylized picture of a star on it, and the words, "Morning Star - PCUSA." The Morning Star Church of Bayville, New Jersey had given it to me. They were one of the congregations of our presbytery. "PCUSA" is, of course, the initials of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Nothing controversial about that... or so I thought. One hot afternoon in Cuba, I was sitting across from Xiomara Arenas, director of the national Presbyterian camp, where we were staying. Through an interpreter, we were sharing stories of our two churches: how we were alike, how we were different. I listened to Xiomara talk about the difficult years, when the Cuban government strove mightily to discourage Christians from gathering to worship — and how much more open religious life is now, since the government has abandoned atheism as the state religion. For my part, I spoke of the difficulties of teaching the faith in a comfortable, affluent society — which pays lip service to Christianity, but which is often adept at ducking Jesus' challenging teachings about justice for the poor.

It was then that Xiomara pointed to the logo on my shirt. I could tell from the baffled expression on her face that something about it had been bothering her.

She pointed to the initials, P.C.U.S.A. “What is this?” she asked, in some confusion — using her limited English. “Partida Comunista U.S.A.”?

In Cuba, the initials of the Presbyterian Church — “Iglesia Presbiteriana y Reformada en Cuba,” are “I.P.R.C.” The initials “P.C.” — especially when combined with the color red, scream out but one thing to a Cuban: “Partida Comunista,” or “Communist Party.”

Well, we had a good laugh over that one, once we realized the difficulties our respective languages had gotten us into. It was a simple misunderstanding, easily remedied: but that, as we all know, is not always the way when people of two cultures and languages try — and sometimes fail — to live side by side in harmony.

The biblical writers know all about that. They know it from the very earliest days. We heard, today, that compelling story from the eleventh chapter of Genesis, of the Tower of Babel. So confident was that primordial culture that its mighty technology could reach the sky — even to the point of touching God — the Lord had no choice but to cast the tower down, and scatter the peoples of the world into different language groups.

For centuries, that was the world everyone knew — a world of clashing cultures, of rampant misunderstandings, of wars and famines and conflicts that could so easily have been avoided, if only the leaders of nations could sit down together and, for one blessed moment, talk the same language.

Even when the language is supposedly held in common, there can be differences. It was Winston Churchill who famously said that England and the United States are “two

countries divided by a common language.” No doubt Meghan and Harry will learn the truth behind Churchill’s quip, as they build their life together.

It’s something every couple learns, even if they both hail from the same country, the same culture. How many marital conflicts come down to misunderstandings of language: the casual remark perceived as a cutting insult, when the partner who voiced those words meant no such thing!

The curse of the Tower of Babel is still among us, it seems: even when we share a common language.

Scripture tells us, though, of a brief interlude when all that misunderstanding was set aside, when the sun broke through the clouds of human misunderstanding, and the divisions of Babel were mended.

It happened on the “Feast of Weeks,” also called Pentecost: one of the greatest holy days of the Jewish year. Thousands of the faithful had descended upon Jerusalem, from every corner of the known world. They’d come to remember the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Among those who had gathered in the city were the confused, dispirited followers of one Jesus of Nazareth, who had recently been crucified. “They were all together in one place,” the scriptures tell us. Most of these men and women had seen Jesus with their own eyes, after he’d been raised from the dead. Now he had departed, and they would see him no more.

What next? That was the question. What next, when you’ve just seen the whole history of the human race cracked open, and put back together again?

“Suddenly, there came from heaven a sound like the rush of a violent wind.... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them.” They poured out into the streets, suddenly able to

communicate in different languages. It was as though, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the curse of Babel had been lifted.

Every time I've examined this passage in the past, I've tended to concentrate on the miracle of being able to speak another language. "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia..." the names of the nations — and their languages — fairly roll off the lips. Yet in the confusion of that miraculous moment, of the people running around so giddily that some imagined them to be drunk, it's easy to miss one small verse: "...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

Yes, Pentecost is a miracle of speaking: but even more, the day is a miracle of listening. The joy of these early Christians is not so much what they are able to speak, as what they are able to hear — and understand.

Some years ago I was part of an Internet discussion group with a United Church of Canada pastor named Chris Ewing, from Saskatchewan. I remember how she shared an experience she'd had at the time her first child was born.

Back then, she was living and working in Montreal, serving a French-speaking church. The people of the church encouraged her to speak to her young son, Ian, in French, and to let her husband speak to him in English. That way, he would grow up bilingual.

"I tried," Chris wrote. "Really I did. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't speak to my own flesh and blood in my second language. It wasn't that my French was poor; it wasn't.... The barrier was not in my grasp of the language but in my soul.... I feel the same way about [all] my acquired languages: though they help me grasp and participate in the world better, they are still an object interposed between me and that world; and for genuine intimacy, all objects need to be

out of the way.”

That’s the kind of thing God desires for the church, on the Day of Pentecost: God yearns for that brief and beautiful moment when the curse of Babel is reversed: when all barriers between one human being and another are swept away, so together we can truly hear the language of the soul — each of us in our own language.

My wife, Claire, and others who work in hospice ministry tell how frequently it happens that dying patients, who have functioned perfectly well for decades using English as a second language, gradually revert to their first language on their deathbed. If their dying is prolonged, or if dementia is a factor, they may lose their English ability altogether. This creates certain practical difficulties for the hospice team, who have to scramble to find a translator.

It’s a beautiful thing, though, in its own way: how, when certain people prepare to cross over into the next life, they are focusing so clearly on seeing their parents and grandparents, those who have gone before them — and how they may journey, in memory, back to the time in distant childhood when they first met Jesus. It only makes sense that they would want to function, from that point onward, in the language of home: for home is where they are headed.

The miracle of Pentecost is that our God addresses us in the language of home: “In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” Our relationship with God is meant to be intimate. God means there to be no barriers to our understanding, no obstacles to block our awareness that our Lord is near.

When Jesus himself is dying on the cross, he speaks not Greek, the language of commerce and learning, which is a second language for him, and not Hebrew either — the language of theological study. No, he speaks Aramaic: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani”: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In his dying agony, he reverts to the language he learned

at his mother's knee.

There's another occasion when the gospel-writers record Jesus speaking Aramaic. When he's teaching the disciples to pray, he instructs them to address God as "Abba" — the Aramaic diminutive for "Father." Literally, he's advising them to address God as "Daddy."

In death and in prayer, in times of extreme solitude — when (as the gospel hymn puts it), "we've got to walk that lonesome valley, we've got to walk it by ourselves" — you and I may be blessed to hear God speaking to us in our own language. That's a wonder and a joy.

What makes it happen, of course, is love. No human language can adequately bear the message of love. What's far more effective than speaking, though, is listening. To listen to another person — to really listen, as the disciples did on the Day of Pentecost — is to create a sort of synapse between two nerves, a gap across which the spark of love can take its bold leap.

Bishop Curry captured this characteristic of love yesterday as he spoke these words:

There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live. Set me as a seal on your heart. A seal on your arm. For love is strong as death.

Let me share with you a little story:

There is a tribe, I'm told, in East Africa in which the art of true intimacy is fostered even before birth. In this tribe, the birth date of a child is not counted from the day of its physical birth or even the day of conception, as in other village cultures. For this tribe, the birth date is the first time the child is a thought in its mother's mind. When a woman intends to conceive a child with her husband, the

mother first goes off to sit alone under a tree. There she sits and listens until she can hear the song of the child she hopes to bear. Once she has heard it, she returns to her village and teaches it to the father so they can sing it together as they make love, inviting the child to join them. As she senses a stirring in her womb, she sings it to the child within her. Then she teaches it to the old women and midwives of the village, so that throughout the labor that is to come — and at the miraculous moment of birth itself — the child is greeted with its own song.

After the birth, all the villagers learn the song of their new member and sing it to the child whenever it falls or hurts itself. The song is sung in times of triumph, and in rituals and initiations. The song becomes a part of the marriage ceremony when the child is grown, and at the end of life, his or her loved ones will gather around the deathbed and sing this song for the last time.

Maybe it's not spoken language, but it's a wonder and a joy — and the promise of Pentecost — that God does not stay in heaven, remotely high, but rather accommodates to us. God sends Jesus the Son to be our savior, and commissions the Holy Spirit to be our advocate. For God knows our language. God knows our song. God knows us, in our inmost being.

As the Psalmist has written, we are bold to pray:

**“O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;**

**you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,
you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.”**

**But you, O Lord, *can* attain it.
You can bridge that gap, as you did on the Day of Pentecost.
You can do it for us today.
And you inspire us to do the same as we seek to love one another.
All praise and honor to you! Amen.**

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