

DAY OF PENTECOST | MAY 31, 2020

ACTS 2:1-21 | PSALM 104:24-34, 35b | 1 CORINTHIANS 12:3b-13 |
JOHN 20:19-23

There's a lot going on at Pentecost. Tongues of fire. Rushes of wind. Long speeches. But underneath all that commotion is a fairly simple story. Fifty days after his resurrection, the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowers them to make new connections by speaking languages besides their native tongue. So at its heart, Pentecost is all about new connections.

People often refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the church. This new community is gathered and then it is sent out to the world so that more people can be brought in. That story works well enough for a kind of shorthand, but it has a certain dynamic to it that can get us into all sorts of problems. Which is that it's all about sameness.

Sometimes when people want to explain Pentecost that way, they invoke the tower of Babel story from Genesis as its opposite. That story is about God giving people different languages so they can't communicate and they don't become too powerful. So Pentecost, the argument goes, undoes the punishment of Babel. It brings people back together. But if you think about it for more than, like, two seconds, you see the major problem with that. It suggests that sameness is what God intends. And, even worse, it suggests that the diversity of creation is some kind of punishment.

Our understanding of our mission often privileges sameness, of other people becoming like us. Sometimes this plays out in rather silly ways. Many people grieve the lack of unity in the church and wonder if we can't put aside our differences and get along. Which is fine and good. But ask them what it would take for churches to unify and they answer, "Become like us!"

But sometimes it plays out in extremely harmful ways. In the fifteen century, Pope Alexander VI said that Spain and Portugal had a divine right to "discover" the new world. This was obviously an absurd argument since you can't discover a place where millions of people live. So the pope just said that the natives who lived there didn't really count as people.¹ Willie Jennings, probably our best historian of colonialism and Christianity, notes that the central aim of Christian missionaries in this era was to "to bring the new worlds into maturity, mature use, mature development, and of course a mature perception of the world."² Mature, of course, is just another way of saying "like us." People become people when they become like us.

At the center of all of those stories is a belief that diversity is a problem that needs to be fixed, and an assumption that we are the center of God's activity. And when you understand your mission that way, the results will be, at best, terribly annoying and, at worst, unimaginably harmful.

But Pentecost is really about something else. It's about new connections that are formed by learning to speak other people's languages. It helps to stop here and think a little bit about the importance of language as the means for how these new connections are formed. When we learn someone's language, we don't just learn a bunch of vocabulary to translate words. We learn how to view the world through someone else's experience. This is why when you take a foreign language class in school, you learn all about culture. Music. Food. Family life. Government. Sports. You're not just learning the words someone uses. You're learning about how they experience life.

¹ This is often referred to as the "Doctrine of Discovery," and provided much of the basis for Indian removal in the United States in the early nineteenth century. You can also see some vestiges of this in how white individuals who live in gentrifying areas are called "pioneers" despite living in neighborhoods with high population density.

² Willie James Jennings, "European Christian Missionaries and Their False Sense of Progress," *The Christian Century*, October 31, 2018. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/european-christian-missionaries-and-their-false-sense-progress>

Learning another language can be really hard for us. Not just because they construct sentences differently than we do or they gender their words for God knows what reason. But because it means having to experience the world in which you are not at the center. If you've ever traveled abroad somewhere where they speak a different language, you know it's difficult not just because you have to think about everything all the time (What am I eating? Am I in the right bathroom? Did I miss my stop?), but because it makes you humble. You have to depend on other people's generosity and patience and good humor. Learning other people's languages dislodges us from our sense that we are at the center of everything. It makes us interact as equals.

Pentecost is all about how God creates those new kinds of connections marked by mutuality. Mutual growth. Mutual enrichment. Mutual responsibility. Connections where we learn to speak other people's languages. Sometimes that's literally true. We sing and pray in other people's languages. One of our intercessory prayers every week comes from another country. So we take on someone else's language and words. But it can also be more than that. We learn to speak other people's languages when we take their experience of the world as seriously and as urgently as our own. When their problems become worthy of consideration and their hopes weighty enough to set our agenda.

Oftentimes our sense of mission slides back into viewing other people not as equals, but as problems to be fixed or people to be saved. Not long ago, I had some interaction with a neighboring church that proudly talked of its "outreach to Paterson." There's no question this was well-intentioned and had some positive effect. But it was remarkable that there was no explanation of what specific social problems they are trying to address. No examination of why these social problems exist in the first place. And no invitation for the people who are being served to determine how outreach efforts are run. In other words, mission without learning someone else's language.

There are different ways of doing things. One of the great things the ELCA does is facilitate companion synod relationships with various Lutheran church bodies around the world. The New Jersey Synod has relationships with Lutherans in Namibia and Croatia. And those relationships are premised on the idea of mutuality. That we don't go to Namibia or Croatia and say, "These are your problems, and this is how you need to fix them." We say, "Tell me about being church in Namibia. Tell me about what it means to be a Lutheran in Croatia." And then we invite them here and say, "Let us tell you about how we do things. And maybe you can help us be more faithful in our witness." We engage to learn, to be enriched by one another's witness, and to learn someone else's language.

Those relationships are Pentecostal. Not because they have tongues of fire and gushing wind and long speeches or any of the other things we normally associate with Pentecost. But because the Holy Spirit allows us to encounter others the way Christ our brother encounters us. A God who experiences the hardships and joys of life. A God who experiences things from our point of view. Or, as St. Luke would put it, a God who learns our language.

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