

Sermon for Pentecost, Year C
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham
May 23, 2010

Language provides a doorway into understanding and processing life. It's our primary vehicle for relationships, for society's culture and values. At the 10:00 service today, we will baptize London Hicks, who at 10 months, may not be saying much, but is already paying keen attention to language, this door to her future.

Language, however, can equally be a barrier to understanding and being part of relationships and culture. At the end of college, I won a scholarship to study in Tuebingen, Germany for a year. I had had three years of college German, and as soon as I went over, I took a six-week intensive course in German grammar and vocabulary. And yet, I remember thinking that I had the language abilities of a German 5-year-old. Maybe. I didn't understand jokes, the newspaper was filled with slang and technical terms that were beyond me, and any conversation about political or social issues left me lost. The language was still a huge barrier to me. Early on, strolling through a village, I walked across a field and was accosted by a resident, who yelled at me in a flood of incomprehensibility. I never understood either what I did wrong or what he was saying. It was mystifying!

By the end of the year, however, my language skills had improved to the point that the door to understanding had opened wide. I felt increasingly at home in the country and culture. I began to understand the political and social issues around foreign workers, student housing, and dislike of US policies. I could appreciate the German emphasis on thrift, cleanliness, and industry, and see students' uneasiness with Germany's past. I could even understand jokes from time to time.

Language can serve as a doorway, a uniting force, or it can serve as a barrier. The story of the tower of Babel points to the power of language to do both of these. It is an ancient myth that tries to make sense of both the enormous potential of humans and language, and the difficulties that can arise with these. It says that all humans spoke one language, so they decided to make a big city and a tower that would reach heaven, in order to make a name for themselves. See, aren't we great? Look what we can do! Indeed, Babylonians were known for their great ziggurats, pyramid-shaped temples that seemed to rise up to heaven.

Now it says that the Lord saw the tower that the humans had built, and was worried, because their power was so great: if that can do this, what won't they be able to do? So the Lord decided to thwart them; he confused their language, so that they wouldn't understand each other, and scattered them across the face of the earth. Now, I have another theory. And that is that as they made the tower, everybody had their own idea of how it should look and what it should accomplish. And pretty soon arguments broke out about how high it should be and where the windows should be placed and what color the walls should be and who should pay for it and so on. As tensions rose, misunderstandings and fights arose, and factions developed, and after awhile this group wasn't speaking to that group, and then people stomped off in anger in every direction. Whether the Lord did it, or whether humans caused it, the result was the people weren't speaking to each other, didn't understand each other, and stopped working together on the tower.

It's been that way ever since—wars and misunderstandings and an inability to cooperate. And it arose when people trusted in their own power to try to reach heaven and make a name for themselves.

After thousands of years of this, God sent Jesus to do a new thing. And after Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles were gathered together in Jerusalem. Suddenly, the house was filled with sound--the rushing of a violent wind, and then a bizarre sight—tongues of fire everywhere, and settling on each apostle. The Holy Spirit had come, and the result was that each apostle started speaking in a different language, a language they didn't even know, but a language that someone else knew and understood. In Jerusalem, there were people from all over the known world, and all at once these foreigners are hearing their native language spoken. Where they had felt isolated and cut off, suddenly they feel welcomed and at home!

But the apostles aren't just saying any old thing—they are specifically speaking the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus. “We hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.” Notice the parallels with the Tower of Babel: In that story, the people want to make a name for themselves, by using their power to build a city and reach heaven. The end result is confused speech, misunderstanding, and distance. When the Holy Spirit comes, people who have been separated by speech and distance are drawn together in a common language and common understanding. The spirit-inspired language speaks about God's mighty deeds through Christ, making a name for God. It ends with an invitation, claiming that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved, that is, rescued from death, fear, and isolation.

In this experience, the apostles are equipped for the new work. They are joined together in common understanding of what they are to do. They are to take the news of Jesus Christ to others, form communities of prayer, and care for the people among them. The Holy Spirit has never stopped this work, and is characterized by the ability to break down language barriers, help people see and speak about God, and build up communities that grounded in prayer, worship, and support.

Anne Lamott records a miracle at her church in the story “Knocking on Heaven's Door” ([Traveling Mercies](#), Anchor Books, 1999, pp. 63 ff). She writes,

“One of our newer members, a man named Ken Nelson, is dying of AIDS, disintegrating before our very eyes. He came in a year ago with a Jewish woman who comes every week to be with us, although she does not believe in Jesus. Shortly after the man with AIDS started coming, his partner died of the disease. A few weeks later Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon's loss left, and had been there ever since. Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant. He looks like God's crazy nephew Phil. He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us.

“There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all. Or she looks at him sideways, as if she wouldn't hav to quite see him if she didn't look at him head on. She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life—that he—was an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this . . . But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.

“So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang “Jacob’s Ladder,” (and) Kenny couldn’t even stand up. But he sang away sitting down . . . And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing “His Eye Is On the Sparrow.” The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen—only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap—and we began to sing, “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up—lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. . . Then both Ken and Ranola began to cry. Tears were pouring down their faces, and their noses were running like rivers, but as she held him up, she suddenly lay her black weeping face against his feverish white one . . . ” (P. 66)

Two people, from different backgrounds, different worlds, different ways of speaking about life and love and God. The Holy Spirit moved over them in worship, and suddenly, in a hymn, they both began speaking the same language. The language of mercy and hearts broken and redeemed. The reality of God broke into that moment, and they became united in tears and in hearts. A miracle indeed.

There has never been more need for the Holy Spirit than now. We’re a multicultural world—my kids grew up eating Italian, Armenian, Chinese, Thai, Japanese, and Mexican food—and have grown up with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, genocide in Sudan, fear of terrorists, Iran and N. Korea. They have seen the Tower of Babel grow—the human quest for energy, money, and power has not only led to wars and injustice, but to global destruction of the environment, threatening all life on earth.

It would be a terrible place to welcome London into, were it not for signs of the Holy Spirit. In just the last decade, I have seen Jews, Christians, and Muslims speak to each other as never before. I have seen scientists and believers and educators and doctors all speaking the same language of concern for the planet and the welfare of children. I have seen people from all over the globe push their governments to work proactively to reduce global warming, and people come to the aid of the least of these, even earthquake victims in Haiti.

We want London to grow up speaking the language of the Holy Spirit. To know of God’s great power and mercy, and of the renewing power of Jesus Christ. If she speaks this language, there is, as John’s Gospel says, great work waiting for her, great deeds that God can do through her.

May God pour out his Holy Spirit on London, and may God pour his Spirit out on us, that we all may be empowered to speak the language of faith, and to vessels for God’s mighty works.

Amen.