

## **THE LANGUAGE OF WELCOME**

**Scripture Readings:** Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21;  
John 7:37-39

**Texts:** Numbers 11:27-30; Acts 2:4-8

Several years ago I was able to go to Jordan and Israel on a tour with around 39 other pastors from various denominations—not necessarily a good idea but that’s a story for another time. While we were in Jordan, a shopkeeper taught me to say ‘thank you’ in Arabic—shukran—along with a gentle observation, “If you are in my country, shouldn’t you learn some of our language?” I could not disagree with her; I think she was right that whenever we travel, we should learn how to say some basic things: please, thank you, and, of course, the most important: ¿Dónde es el baño? or “Wo ist die Toilette?”

The shopkeeper’s reminder sticks with me; language is important because not only does language help us communicate basic things and courtesies, it also helps reveal our innermost selves. Without language we would exist as beings stuck inside our own minds, unable to really reveal anything about ourselves to one another. With language we can soar to fantastic philosophic, theological, and scientific heights, or we can sink to the depths of silly jokes about various bodily functions. With language we can share feelings, hopes, and dreams. Through language we bond with one another while we can also divide. We can heal and comfort someone while we can also hurt and destroy someone. The writer of James calls the tongue—that is, language—an instrument where we steer mighty ships like a small rudder or start a fire to burn down an entire forest.

I think the power of language can help us understand the Pentecost story. The English translation we have is a pale reflection of what the gospel writer of Luke intended. The power of the Spirit in leading the disciples to speak in other languages isn’t simply that the disciples can utter a few foreign words. Rather, what truly amazes the listeners is that the disciples are, as the Greek says, speaking in idioms and dialects. These backwater Galileans speak about the glory of God not with just a bit of Arabic or Cappadocian, they are speaking in a way that the listeners can feel like they are back home talking with neighbors and family. The listener has been transported. No wonder Peter’s sermon that follows has such an impact—those hearing felt embraced by the language spoken. That language lends hope that God communicates with the heart.

The story reveals that the power of the Spirit for the gospel writer of Luke brings believers together in hope and community. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new age where people can come together in common language, love, and trust. The Spirit brings the community together with a completely understood word of Good News.

We realize that the promise has been present all along. In the story from Numbers, we see the promise of new community through the Spirit of God guiding speech once again. Like much of the story of the journey through the Wilderness, Moses and God have been taking turns with being frustrated by the Hebrews. In the story before today's passage, Moses expresses frustration and exhaustion, so God instructs Moses to select 70 elders from among the people to share Moses' burden and leadership.

Moses leads the 70 elders away from the camp where they gather for prayer; in the midst of prayer, God shares some of the spirit God had given Moses. When the spirit is shared, the elders begin to prophesy—that is, give glory to God—and, yes, you can hear the precursor to the Pentecost story. The sharing of the spirit is so infectious that two elders back at the camp also begin to prophesy.

Joshua, who is obviously the Stated Clerk, feels that the two elders back at the camp are out of order and they must cease immediately. Moses responds that he would like the spirit to be given to all God's people.

I wonder if we are a bit more like Joshua than Moses. We want to restrict the community, even gate it if we have the opportunity. We do want to keep things decent and in order even it means restricting the Spirit. When the Spirit gets out of control we want to tamp it down like Joshua or we accuse those led by the Spirit as being drunk.

The Spirit cannot be restricted or inhibited; the Spirit is about radical inclusion. When Spirit leads, we are about welcome and hope. The Spirit invites everyone in, no one is shut out—if you can breathe, you're in! To be the church, then, means that we have been called to usher all of God's children into community with us. This invitation to join the circle of God's children doesn't measure holiness or purity, rightness of doctrine, or dogma, the Spirit and those led by the Spirit welcome all who can hear even when it has to be sign language.

Do you know what really proves to me that the Spirit is about radical inclusion? In spite of the Jordanian shopkeeper's gentle admonition to me, the Spirit in Jerusalem influenced the situation in a different way. It was not that the Spirit suddenly gifted all the people in Jerusalem with the ability to understand Hebrew or backwater

Galilean Aramaic. The Spirit enabled the followers of Jesus to speak in the home language of the guest, the foreigner. Those strangers to the land suddenly heard words from home and those words brought them comfort and hope.

The church should never be about using language as a wall to shut some people out because they don't speak the right words or don't live in a way in which we approve. The church cannot live if it only opens its doors and waits for people to come in.

The call of the church is to open the doors and speak out so that all can not only understand the praise we give to God but hears the language we use to welcome them in. All who enter into the community of faith are to be honored, respected and cherished. The words we use should help the stranger feel as though he or she already belongs because that person has found home once again.

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