

“Languages of the Heart” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (5/28/2023, The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday)

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On October 9th, 1972, a woman named Minnie Adams Scovell died in Tillamook County, Oregon. She was 79 years old. You can find her gravestone on findagrave.com, and you can find a picture of Minnie with her cousin Mabel, both standing beside their respective mothers, Emma and Jane. And while those names might all sound like standard names for white American women born in the late nineteenth century, Minnie, Mabel, Emma, and Jane were not white American women. They were Tillamook, an indigenous people from coastal Oregon. The Tillamook were skilled basket-weavers, whalers and fishermen, and hunters. They have lived in the tidewaters west of Portland, Oregon for probably at least 12,000 years. According to a Native American Encyclopedia published fairly recently, only 50 Tillamook descendents lived in and around these ancestral lands by the year 1990.

And so, back to Minnie Adams Scovell. The reason her death in 1972 is notable is that she is generally considered to be the last speaker of the Tillamook language, a language that flourished and thrived along with the Tillamook people for thousands of years. When she died, her son remembered bits and pieces of the language, phrases and words, but it was not his native tongue as it was hers.

For Minnie, Tillamook was her heart language. It was the language her mother sang to her in, the language she learned from her parents and her small community, but a language that quickly disappeared in her own life just as it had quickly disappeared from the cultural world of her people over the past two hundred years.

Languages die, and when they do, an entire way of thinking about the world dies with them. As you know if you have ever tried to learn another language, or if you had the great blessing of growing up bilingual, with two native languages, you become another person when you enter into another language. Your personality may change. If you're a native speaker of say, both English and Spanish, you may find yourself expressing yourself in a completely different way in one versus the other. You might be hilarious in one and serious in the other. You might think of one as your academic or business language, and the other as your family language.

Or if you're just learning a language and travel to another country to try it out, you will find yourself much more reserved, shy, embarrassed. You speak in short, clipped sentences. You can't get much out beyond the essentials. “Me want that.” “Please to have another?” “Can you carry to me the billing for my meal?”

It can be a very humbling and disorienting experience not to have others understand what you are trying to say. What you need. What you want.

The theologian Willie James Jennings points out what many of us have sensed if we have ever studied another language or even just interacted with people who speak a different language. He puts it this way: “to learn a language requires submission to a people.” In other words, learning a language is much more than just learning a language. It is learning a culture, a way of life, a way of looking at the world. There are so many assumptions built into language.

Each word we use has a history, a winding path of evolution that is fascinating and complex and rich and often quite accidental. To learn another language is to submit ourselves to another perspective, another history, another tribe. To do this willingly can be indeed a spiritual exercise of hospitality, of openness to the Other—a spiritual exercise of listening and receiving the way that Jesus listened to others, in order to receive them on *their* terms, not my own; listening not as waiting for my turn to speak, but listening as an act of *submission*.

To impose a language on someone else can demonstrate the tragedy of colonization. Language is often used as a tool of Empire, to unify people of different tribes, ethnicities, and nationalities under the banner of the Imperial power, to make the conquered peoples forget their own traditions and practices. Think of Minnie, losing the language of her ancestors. Think even of my own grandfather, forced to speak English rather than his native French once he started school, whipped if he forgot to do so. These acts are precisely the opposite of the way Jesus operated, since they seek to *impose my terms* on someone

weaker. They give me a chance to exercise **power** and **authority** over someone else. And they seek to diminish the **language of the heart** that is at someone's deepest core of meaning and memory.

I offer these reflections because it seems that language is crucial to the Pentecost story, which is itself crucial to the Church's definition as a **group of people who are willing to submit to one another, to listen to one another, to learn to speak each other's languages.**

The dominant images of Pentecost suggest a stark reversal from the kind of false unity suggested by Empires that subjugate and dominate people by insisting that they all speak the same language. We notice the suggestion of excitement and joy raised by their question, "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? . . . in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

Our own native language . . . the language of our mothers and fathers. The language of our heart. The language of our birth, of our people. The language we use to describe our grandmother's cooking. The language we use to talk about the flowers in the fields back home. The language that was sung to us when we were babies, to calm us and to reassure us. The language we spoke to our grandparents as they peacefully slipped away from us. Our native language.

And now, to hear that language being used to describe God's deeds of power. Think of it! Think of the intimacy, the closeness, the immediacy of hearing about God's love, God's grace, the worth of each of us in God's eyes, being spoken in the same language, whatever it is, that means the most to us. The language that brings tears to our eyes when we hear it spoken. The language of our hearts.

This is the first open scandal of the Christian Church, on full display in the middle of the city of Jerusalem: that God has chosen to work through the tongues of all nations; that God's Holy Spirit can and will speak through a diverse collection of nationalities and cultures; that there is no one nation or people that can claim God as their sole possession; that God is for ALL people. The book of Acts will continue to unfold the theme far beyond Pentecost, but this is its opening miracle. And what a miracle it is.

The sound that is described in Acts 2 is a violent, turbulent wind. It is the sound that a tornado makes, a sound that many of us may have personally experienced. It is not a peaceful image, but an image of something completely surprising, completely unexpected, completely out of the ordinary. A tornadic wind, and fire, something that is not tame or safe. Something that can easily get out of control. Something powerful and yet beautiful, terrifying and comforting somehow at the same time.

There is a reason that both of these images are used to describe God in the person of the Holy Spirit. The disciples had been dutifully waiting and praying since Jesus's mysterious Ascension ten days earlier. They were waiting for something, but they didn't know what it was! All they knew, all they could do, was watch and pray. And God surprised them.

As Willie James Jennings says, "The [disciples] may have asked for the Holy Spirit to come, but they did not ask for this. This is real grace, untamed grace. It is the grace that replaces our fantasies of power over people with God's . . . desire for people."

Think of our baptismal covenant in this light, in this Pentecostal light, in the light of the revelation of God's desire for all people to experience Divine Light, Divine Fire, Divine Grace. "Will you seek and serve Christ in ALL persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" "Will you strive for justice and peace among ALL people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

Both of these questions suggest that we must be prepared for the Holy Spirit to invade our lives and to overturn our assumptions. We must be prepared for the Holy Spirit to give us what we did not ask for. We must be prepared for the Holy Spirit to ask—no, to demand—that we love ALL the people God gives us to love. We must be prepared for those people to speak different languages, both literally and metaphorically, that is to say, people who look at the world differently than we do.

We must be prepared for God to let all sorts of people into the Kingdom whom we would not: As the late Rachel Held Evans said, “what makes the Gospel offensive isn’t who it keeps out but who it lets in.” Or as the Irish novelist James Joyce defined the Church: “Here Comes Everybody.”

The Church has not always done the best job of setting the Holy Spirit free to do God’s work, and yet when we look at the diversity of the Church’s work over the last 2,000 years, at the diversity of her Saints, of the diversity of her expressions of joy and gratitude for the Grace of God, we marvel at God’s gift of the Holy Spirit working in and through quite ordinary people in quite extraordinary ways.

But that work is not over. For us, and especially today for Jennifer, and Stacy, and Lorena, it is just beginning. The Book of Acts and the story of Pentecost is a reminder that our faith is not lived in the past, that God’s action is not limited to the past, that even God’s surprising and radical intrusion into the lives of ordinary people is not limited to the past.

Professor Jennings says that it is not immutability but irrevocability that characterizes the book of Acts, and thus God’s work in our world through the Holy Spirit.

In other words, God’s work is not something immutable, unchangeable, static, boring. It is IRREVOCABLE—set loose, set free, like a powerful avalanche coming down the mountain. He says “now that the life of Jesus has been marked in space and time, [his way] cannot be denied. Now that God has shown the divine life to be this way and not another way and now that women and men have been extravagantly embraced by the Spirit of God, there is no going back.”

This story is not a monument to the past: it is the story of a God who continues to work in lives today.

This story is not a monument to the past: it shows us that our world, too, is a stage for God’s Divine and Surprising Activity.

This story is not a monument to the past: God speaks our language! God speaks to each one of us in the language of our heart, the language of comfort, the language of our deepest being. And just as importantly, God allows us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to LISTEN and to HEAR what God is doing in the lives of others, the lives of people around us, the lives of all those whom God brings us to love.

On this Pentecost Day and always, may we be quick to listen for God’s Holy Spirit speaking our heart language, and may we be quick to listen to the diverse languages of God’s presence in the lives all around us!

AMEN.