



“Spirit Speak”

Day of Pentecost
5:30 p.m. Saturday, May 14, 2016
The Reverend Alex Martini
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

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

About a year and a half ago, a young woman showed up at the church I serve. She left a note in the offering plate that she'd like the pastor to call. So I called her and about a week and a half later, she was sitting in my office and we were talking.

I asked her how she got to our church. She said she was fairly new to the area and was looking for something that she couldn't quite put her finger on – a connection to something bigger, maybe. She had a boyfriend once who was Lutheran when he was a kid and seemed to have fond memories, so she saw our Lutheran church and wandered in.

She was not a Christian. She wasn't baptized as a child, she didn't grow up in the church, and there was no religious instruction in any school she had ever attended. Most of her friends weren't Christian or religious. She grew up in an area where most people didn't regularly attend church.

She liked the service she attended at my church and kept coming back. Eventually she asked me how it was she could join. I told her that she could join the church through something called the sacrament of holy baptism and that we'd meet a number of times to talk about it in preparation for her baptism.

Now I've talked with lots of people about baptism, but it's usually parents who are bringing their small children to the baptismal font. With this woman, she was very intelligent, but only had a basic cultural understanding of Christianity.

So we sat down and I said, “let's talk about the sacrament of holy baptism.” And she said, “great. What's a sacrament? What do you mean by holy? And is baptism like a Baptist?”

We started with those three words, but each time I defined something new, it led to 3 or 4 more words and phrases that needed definition.

She came wanting to be a part of something bigger and left with a crash course in a brand new language. She put in the work, and she was baptized about three months later. But it was a lot of work and not everyone would have had the patience to make it through.

It made me wonder if I was putting expectations on this young woman that actually hurt the working of the Spirit. God was at work inside her moving her toward faith and I felt like I was just lecturing her. It seemed important to me that she knew the words of our faith.

Must we learn the language of the church in order to be part of what God is up to in and through the church?

I'd love to hear what you think, but I'll tell you the answer from that very first Pentecost. It's a resounding "no!"

On that very first Pentecost, the disciples were all gathered in Jerusalem with Jews from every known corner of the globe celebrating the Jewish festival of Pentecost, the 50th day after the Passover.

I do mean every known corner. Luke really drags out this description – Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, and Cretans and Arabs. This is Luke's way of saying everybody was there.

When they were all in one place, the Holy Spirit made a dramatic entrance. It rushed in like a violent wind. The disciples started talking to all of these people from every nation under heaven. They were telling them about God's mighty deeds of power. But the amazing thing was that they were speaking in the native tongue of each hearer.

The Judeans heard Aramaic or Hebrew, the Arabs heard Arabic, the Elamites heard.... whatever language the Elamites spoke. Elamitey? All of them heard the language they spoke, the language they understood.

This was not in the normal repertoire of tricks for the disciples. They weren't closet language scholars. Jesus didn't pick them up as disciples from various linguistic PhD programs. They were fishermen from rural Israel.

This wasn't the disciples using their gifts. This was the Holy Spirit working in and through them. The Spirit was doing all of the translating on that first Pentecost. And the language that the Spirit speaks is whatever the language the hearer speaks.

The miracle of Pentecost isn't that the Holy Spirit gives people the ability to suddenly speak God. The miracle of Pentecost is that God speaks us. God comes to us in whatever language we know.

I have a friend named Ricardo who's planting a church in the Allison Hill neighborhood in Harrisburg. Ricardo's church is right across the street from a bar and he spends a lot of time in that bar getting to know people, listening to their stories, and offering prayer and support.

The owner of the bar noticed that Ricardo is over there a lot and that people seem to connect with him, so they decided to try something different. Once a month on

Wednesday nights, the bar stops pouring and selling drinks. People get up and move the chairs into a circle and they have a prayer service right there in the bar.

For that hour, anyone who comes in knows that they are welcome and they should grab a chair and join the circle, but their beer is going to have to wait until the service is over. And then they pray and sing and read scripture together.

Ricardo's church is literally right across the street. But they don't go over there. They stay in the bar. Eventually people do wander over there on Sunday mornings and a few people have become part of his church. But they don't go there first. Because Ricardo knows that the Holy Spirit doesn't make us speak God's language first. God speaks ours. God speaks bar.

And God speaks whatever language you speak, too. I don't mean just English or Spanish, though God is certainly fluent in those. I mean God can connect with you wherever you happen to be in life right now. Whatever your native tongue, God knows it, too.

Are you speaking the language of the busy family life right now? Who needs to go where when? How will we find a few minutes to squeeze in a meal together today? Good news – God speaks busy family. The Spirit will bring you a word of comfort and peace in your native tongue.

Are you spending a lot of time talking in the language of retirement? What's going to make one day different from the next? How can I find meaning and purpose? Good news – God speaks retirement. The Spirit will bring you a word of meaning and worth in your language.

God speaks football. God speaks depression and anxiety. God speaks addiction and recovery. God speaks joy and love. God speaks the highest highs and the lowest lows. God speaks doubt. God speaks diagnosis. God speaks hope.

The miracle of Pentecost is that God speaks you. You don't have to learn a whole new language for the Holy Spirit to tell you about the mighty deeds of God's power. You don't need a translator to hear about what God is up to in your life and in the life of the world.

God speaks you because God doesn't want any barriers coming between you and God. Come, Holy Spirit. Come, open our ears to the truth of God's mighty deeds of power happening in and through us. Amen.

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