

The summer before my senior year of high school, I went to a 4 week Spanish immersion program called the Governor's Spanish Academy. About 40 students from all over the state of Virginia spent that month at Averett College in Danville speaking only Spanish except for 5 minutes every other day, when we were allowed to call home. By the day of our closing ceremony, when we returned back to the English-speaking mainstream of our lives, we were not only fluent in speaking Spanish; we were thinking and dreaming in Spanish. It took a couple of days to shift back into thinking and speaking in English...to remember to watch my language around those who couldn't understand what I was saying.

Sadly, I've let my Spanish become very rusty. I don't know that I could carry on a meaningful conversation at this point, although I still know how to ask the all-important question, "¿Dónde está el baño?"—Where is the bathroom? But in college, I was still fluent, bilingual. I went on a Volunteers in Mission trip to San Cosme Mazatecochco, Mexico and was the only member of my team who could pronounce the name of the town. Although VIM provided translators for us, my Spanish turned out to be better than their English, so I translated for the team in museums and churches. I was able, literally, to speak the language of our hosts and those we met along the way, and so I was able to communicate much better than if

I knew no Spanish at all. And I had a sense of community with the folks I was working with, because I spoke their language without the barriers felt by the rest of my team. We understood one another's jokes and silly comments, which would have been lost in translation.

In their travels, Jesus and the disciples would have encountered people who spoke different languages. While they lived under the rule of the Roman Empire, there was no single language that everyone spoke perfectly. Greek appears to have been the language of commerce—so everyone in cities likely knew at least a few words. But on that Pentecost day, as many Jews as could make the pilgrimage traveled to Jerusalem from wherever they were from: the Near- and Middle-East, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Jews at least would know some Hebrew or Aramaic, but church language doesn't always translate to the everyday: saying "O give praise to the Lord" is a very different proposition than saying, "Where can I find a room for the night?" in terms of everyday speech.

Common language and experience bring people together. I am not speaking here merely of *languages*, English, French, Latin, Arabic, and so on, although it is true for them as well. Consider a trip you've taken: if you met someone on that trip who had something in common with you, didn't it make you feel more at home to talk about that thing? The Blue Devils,

where your great aunt Bertha was from, whatever. When we talk about something and share the same vocabulary—saying, for example, that someone is “from off” instead of “not from around here”—tomato, to-mah-to, pecan, pecaan—we speak the same language. Having a common language builds a sense of community, of togetherness, or having something in common with the people around us. This is the same principle behind many social organizations: coming together around a shared meal, a love of gardening or reading, or a desire to participate in service creates a community that we then call a supper club, a garden or book club, Kiwanis or Lions, and so on.

In the church, we also have a common vocabulary and experience. Part of that experience is built here, in the sanctuary, at worship on Sundays, at funerals, weddings, and cantatas. Part of it is built in homes and hospitals, in the fellowship hall and on mission trips. In many cases, it is these shared experiences which then give us the vocabulary to share the community of the Body of Christ: faith, fellowship, communion, prayer, and praise.

The disciples had had many shared experiences which had given them a vocabulary, a language, which was unique to them. While many people had been healed by Jesus Christ, the disciples were healers themselves and witnesses to the healing power of Jesus. While multitudes had heard Jesus

preach in one place or another, the disciples had had many opportunities to learn from him. And while many had spoken with Jesus, the disciples had the privilege of traveling with him, of being his friends and companions, and had heard a great deal that no one else had. They were the witnesses to Jesus' trial and arrest, and if they couldn't stand to see his death, who could blame them for hiding from such tragedy?

And in the fifty days from that first Easter Sunday, from the wonder of the resurrection, we have to ask: where have the disciples been? When the drama, fear, and trauma of Good Friday were shown to be a beginning rather than an end, how did they feel? Did they find themselves charged up, full of excitement, energized by the visits from the Risen Christ, ready and raring to go? We have stories about fishing, and Jesus meeting disciples on the Emmaus road, but where have they been? What have they been up to? What would it take to stir them out of their homes, out of their questions, and into the mission Christ gave them? What does it take to excite us, to give us courage to step out, to speak the gospel as we know it? We'll see in just a moment.

Whatever else the disciples may have been doing, it's come time for another holiday. Passover marked the crucifixion for them, and so they must have entered Jerusalem with some mixed feelings. Pentecost called to them,

to come back to the holy city and worship at the Temple, just as it called Jews from all over the known world. While they shared a common faith, they did not share common languages and cultures: they knew the Temple language, but for these Jews who had been scattered the world over, it must have been difficult to come so far and understand so little of the language of their Judean brothers and sisters.

But it was a feast day, a festival, and so the atmosphere must also have been charged with a carnival air: vendors selling exotic delicacies and treasures from foreign lands, people looking for lost children, sightseers out staring at the strange clothes and facial features, pickpockets and musicians and everyday business people, all out to see the sights, to enjoy the feast, to worship. So the disciples themselves came out to give glory to God, braving the city and the crowds. They were expecting the same chaos of every Pentecost, maybe hoping to lose themselves in the crowds, certainly not expecting to become themselves the center of attention.

Among the masses that day Luke records for us an amazing, life changing, world changing event: the coming of the Holy Spirit to the church. Now remember that the Spirit had been given to the disciples very soon after the resurrection, according to John—this is not the same gift—and Luke doesn't record that story for us in his gospel nor in Acts. But in Luke the

emphasis is not on the Spirit coming for the good of the disciples, to give them encouragement, strength, and focus in those turbulent days following the crucifixion and resurrection.

No, Luke gives us this story to build us into a very different kind of community: instead of a Spirit which strengthens us to keep the faith among ourselves, the Holy Spirit comes in Acts to empower the disciples to share the faith with others. In the middle of the market crowd on a day sacred to the Jews, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they began to preach in a way that everyone around them could understand: regardless of culture, native language, gender, station in life—everyone could hear this good news the disciples preached, and they were amazed. And a new community began to be created that day among diverse people who had come together for a common purpose: to worship and give thanks to God, and who had received more than they bargained for: the gospel of new life in Jesus Christ, God's Son.

This is the good news of the gospel, then and now: that Christ lived, died, and was resurrected for our salvation...which is meant not only for us but for others. Our common language of faith, our sharing of the stories of how we came to know, love, and follow Christ becomes the bedrock of this Body of Christ which is the Church. And on that first day in Jerusalem

when the Church was born, the Holy Spirit makes it plain that the gospel the disciples knew was not for them alone, but for all those who had ears to hear...and that same Spirit made sure they heard it! Not only did the people hear the good news, they heard it as in their native language...their mother tongue, as it were...as if they learned it at their mother's knee or by their father's side.

We can't underestimate the power of this gift, nor its implications for us: we too must learn to speak others' language in order to communicate this gospel, this community, this faith we have been given. And no, I don't mean that everyone has to learn French or Spanish to do it...but if we truly believe that the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples that Pentecost day to share the gospel with others in the way they could best understand it, then we also believe that the Spirit empowers us to do the same. This is one of the reasons we started the evening worship service: because for people who haven't grown up with our hymns and our church language, worship teams leading newer music and a less formal setting are much more comfortable than the Sunday morning we love...and that helps us bring people into the community of faith that shares the good news. We have had to learn to "watch our language" to try to create this new service where people will be drawn into the Ann Street faith community. It's an experiment, to be sure,

but one that's paying off: we have good attendance with new people almost every week, the folks who attend regularly are very supportive, and everyone there speaks well of how welcoming and friendly our church is.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost reminds us that we need to watch our language to be sure we are communicating in a way that draws us closer to God and one another instead of pushing us farther apart. In college, I had a dual major in Environmental Science and Spanish. To complete a requirement for the Spanish major, I had to take two semesters of a second foreign language...as if one weren't enough. I spent my junior year deeply frustrated, convinced that there was only room for one foreign language in my brain, and struggling to learn the simple basics, such as using "Da" for yes in Russian class instead of "Sí." And yes, that took a semester and a half to do. Russian was not the language for me, and rather than the easy companionship I found in my Spanish classes and my Spanish-language dorm, I felt alienated from my classmates because they got it and I didn't. This is not an experience we want people to have with any college course...nor is it at all an experience we want them to have with the gospel of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Needless to say, when there was a VIM trip to Russia being planned, I did NOT sign up.

One purpose of the church—and we have many—is to share our faith with others so that it becomes their faith, too. This is the work of the disciples in Jerusalem that day: to communicate, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the good news that they themselves had already become a part of, so that others could become a part of it too. This is one purpose of our preaching: to share the gospel so that you can hear it and be shaped by it into the community of faith that is the Body of Christ. And this is why our relationships with one another and with people who are not part of our church are so important: because that's the key place we develop a common language that lets us share the gospel in a way others can hear and make a part of themselves.

St. Francis of Assisi has a famous saying attributed to him: “preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words.” Something similar I have seen around somewhere says, “Your actions speak so loud I can't hear the words you're saying.” What a wonderful world it would be if the person who first said that meant that she couldn't understand our minor pettiness because our lives are so clearly preaching the gospel. Somehow I don't think that was the original feeling behind this saying. And yet I long for the day when it would be true in me, and in all those who claim the name “Christian.” Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayer. Amen.