

Acts 2: 1-21
Romans 8: 14-17
John 14: 15-21

Our Own Native Language
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Mary R. Brownlow

As many of you know, my mother was profoundly deaf. She did not hear a single sound in her life, at least from infancy, and possibly from birth. She never learned American Sign Language: she communicated through lip reading, which is a very imperfect form of communication, and she could speak, though many people found it hard to understand her. It wasn't much of a problem for me, since I had been speaking and listening to her from my beginning: she could read my lips pretty well, and I could both read her lips and understand her speech.

Sometimes, in certain situations, like being in a room full of people and at a little distance from each other, we would speak to each other without voice, purely through lip reading. (*without voice: And she would understand what I had to say, and I would understand what she had to say, from twenty feet away*) You all got that, right? (*Repeat, with voice*) It was rather rude, actually. But we did it anyway. My mother's younger brother, my uncle, was partially deaf. So they spoke with lip reading and hand gestures and facial expression and body language, all born of years of familiarity. They could communicate with each other so fast: it was like speed speaking, it was like a dance: I loved watching them.

I once came up with the thought that my mother had no first language, only a second language. She learned English through lip reading a little too late in her childhood, after the time that those language pathways in the brain are most open and active. But then, when I watched her speak with her brother, I realized that I was watching the closest thing there was to her first language: her mother tongue. I watched the ways she was open and alive to what was being said.

Today is Pentecost, and we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to a gathering of God's people. So, speaking of language, do you know what I mean when I say, "Holy Spirit"? Do I know what you mean when you say "Holy Spirit"? There are so many different ways to talk about it. In the book of Genesis, God's Holy Spirit broods with maternal love over the messy primeval waters at the time of creation. In the book of Judges (which we almost never read here) the Holy Spirit comes down and enters certain chosen individuals, empowering them for leadership and military victory. In the book of Isaiah, the Holy Spirit comes to the prophet, so that he can speak and bring good news to the oppressed and liberty to the captives. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes a Holy Spirit of adoption (as opposed to a Spirit of slavery), which will draw all of us into God's family. In the Gospel of John, Jesus promises the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit after his death, a Spirit who will walk alongside his disciples, consoling them. It is a Spirit of truth, a teaching spirit. And then there is our Pentecost story, where the Spirit is like a wind, like a flame, and inspires the disciples to go into the street, speaking many languages. So what do we do with this "Holy Spirit"?

The United Church of Christ, to which we belong, has adopted a sort of motto: "God is Still Speaking." Today is Pentecost, and so we affirm, in the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us and through

us. The Holy Spirit is a linguist, and can speak in many languages. The curious crowds on that Pentecost day in Jerusalem asked, “And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” Or we might translate, “And how do we hear each in our idiomatic dialect in which we were born?” In words, in gesture, in lip-reading, in action, the Holy Spirit speaks today.

In order to create some kind of framework to help us think about this, I am going to pose three questions. First, in what language, does God speak to you and through you? For some, it might be words, a passage of Scripture. For others, music. For others, the beauty of God’s good earth. Many of us have a hard time putting it into words. But I am going to try, for myself. God speaks to me and through me in a gathered congregation responding to my words and actions. You know, in the African American tradition, there is vocal response to preaching, and that is how the preacher is actually **able** to keep preaching and ministering. The response is a necessary component of the work of worship. You don’t do that – the calling out during sermons. Rarely do I hear an Amen or a That’s right. By but your intentional presence, you are conduits of the Holy Spirit to me. God is still speaking, and you are the language.

Here is another idiom for the Spirit speaking to an individual: the poetic idiom. Ten years ago, a third grade schoolboy in the Seattle area named Anthony Manago wrote a poem. He liked to run...and still does, I believe. He wrote:

*If I was a work of art
I would be a picture of the wind
blowing fast.
The wind, sort of light blue,
really hard and strong.
I would be blowing away
from hatred,
blowing toward love.
When people see the picture
they would know
I was going the right direction
instead of the wrong one.*

Second question: In what language does God speak to us and through us to each other? How does a community hear and speak the Spirit? We could say that our local dialect (In Bible Study last week, Priscilla said “our local patois”- I love that) is our local church covenant, that is spoken every communion Sunday, and when we receive people into membership. Or that our common native language is our Open and Affirming resolution, that is always printed in our bulletin. Or perhaps it is the statements about our church on the bulletin board on the way to the parish hall, that were collected in a discussion group last winter. You may think of other ways we share a language of faith. But then I remember the less composed, verbal forms of communication, and I wonder if our common language can be found in the letter Katy Gerke wrote to us a few weeks ago, when she said “*Your aggregate kindnesses, expressed in so many different ways over the last year, with food and visits and flowers and prayers and e-mails and jokes and books, have helped to keep us going.*” The Holy Spirit is speaking to us and through us, and each community finds its own common dialect.

I am going to give you another example of this, from outside our culture. The Maasai Creed, written in 1960 as an adaptation of the ancient Apostles Creed in a cooperative effort of the tribal Maasai people and Catholic missionaries, expresses a universal faith in the language of local experience:

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created Man and wanted Man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the Earth. We have known this High God in darkness, and now we know Him in the light. God promised in the book of His word, the Bible, that He would save the world and all the nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good His promise by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left His home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, He rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through Him. All who have faith in Him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the Good News to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for Him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.

There is a third question for our Pentecost Sunday: In what language does God speak to us and through us to the world? The fire and the wind is not for the disciples alone. Our “local patois” will probably not work for this. Like the Holy Spirit, we will have to be multi-lingual. And so this leads us to more questions before there are answers. Can we speak the language of Dismas House? Can we speak the language of the villages near Cotui in the Dominican Republic? Can we speak the language of our local teenagers? Can we speak the language of the one who is bereaved, and has no church, no spiritual home? Can we speak the language of the suffering earth?

On this Pentecost Sunday, the Spirit speaks and says, “Yes, you can and must and will speak in all these languages.” The Holy Spirit will walk alongside you and teach you these many dialects: the signs language and the lip reading and the words and the actions of loving hearts.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I want to affirm in every language: God is love; Jesus showed us the meaning of religion is love; the Spirit sends us into the future in love.

Pray with me:

Holy Spirit, come to us, and witness to us in our many languages.

Speak the language of our need. Let us hear how our hungers and yearnings may be fulfilled in your service.

Speak the language of our fear. Let us hear how our worries for the future can find rest in your tender care.

Speak the language of our gratitude. Let us hear how our heartfelt thanks can draw us into union with each other and you, our Creator.

Speak to us in the language of hope. Let us hear how our dreams for the future are not wishful thinking, but responses to your promise.

Holy Spirit, bless us. Amen.