

Acts 2: 1-21  
Romans 8: 14-17  
John 14: 15-21, 25-27

Our Own Native Language  
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I love the English language, my own native language. It is so much fun and, at times, so bewildering. I just learned a new word this week: auto-antonym. An auto-antonym is a word that has a twin word of the same spelling which means its opposite. So, to cleave can mean either to separate or to adhere. To sanction can mean either to permit or to penalize. To bolt can mean either to leave quickly or to attach. Fast can mean either moving rapidly or unmoving. And there are lots of others. With a language like this, how can we ever understand what another person is trying to tell us?

But all over the place, communication has become more of a pre-occupation, and more of an industry than ever. We not only have the option of speech. We can write letters, write e-mails, use skype and facebook and face time and twitter. The entire globe has opened up as a complex arena of mass communication. For many of us, it is just a question of how to separate the junk from the treasure, or the dross from the silver, or the noise from the music or the pertinent from the impertinent. Not only that, but the multiplicity of communication modes means a multiplicity of mis-understandings. So much nuance is lost in e-mail, for instance, that at times we should just remember not to push the send icon and to wait for a face to face meeting. We might all speak English, but what do we need to say and what do we need to hear?

And so we come to Pentecost, the festival day of for the gift of understanding. It comes with a wonderful story written by Luke in the book of Acts. No English auto-antonyms here...just a roomful of Galileans in Jerusalem, wondering what to do next. I think that they were scared and hopeful, mourning the past without a clear idea of the future, and maybe wishing for the good old days, when they felt the close ties and understanding of community with Jesus as their teacher and guide. There they were, praying in their Galilean patois, waiting to see what God had in store.

In that time, multiple languages were spoken in Jerusalem, that outpost city of the Roman Empire. Latin, of course, was the official language, but much of daily life was conducted in Greek. (All the books of the New Testament, for example, were written in Greek). Amongst the Jews, Hebrew was the language of worship, but most conversation and some writing was done in Aramaic or another dialect. Then people might pick up other languages for trade or travel, like Syriac or Punic or Coptic. It is easy to imagine that most people were bi- or tri-lingual.

About 120 followers of Jesus were gathered in one place on that Pentecost morning. The rest of the city was quite crowded, because many foreign Jews had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish spring festival of Pentecost. The story makes it sound like the disciples were expelled from the house with an explosion of enthusiasm, symbolized by wind and fire. They were pushed out into the street, full of words about “God’s deeds of power.”

What puzzled the people in the street was that these talkative people were Galileans, and somehow they spoke the *dialekto* or dialect of the other Jews. It was not that they were babbling in

a very obscure language (as is sometimes seen in Pentecostal churches today) but that they were **so** easy to understand. This time in reading the story, I noticed that it says twice that they **heard** their own dialect, as though the hearing was as remarkable as the speaking. They were shocked because a strange Galilean had reached out and elicited comprehension, and so they said to each other “what does this mean?” or, literally “what will come to be out of this?”

There are two things I want to note about this: the shock and the “what came to be.” Sometimes we are shocked when someone offers us a kindness or reaches out to us when we did not expect it. We are shocked that they saw us for who we are at our core, where “our own native language” lives. But it is the kind of shock that makes it much easier to hear and accept what they have to say. The apostles continued to be shocking. Their proclamation and mission kept expanding, and going out to people of all nations...not only those with different dialects and languages, but also different diets and cultural practices, with different identities. They learned, over time, not to always demand that converts come to them, but were about to meet them at least halfway, sometimes changing themselves in the process.

The call of Jesus, expressed in the gift of the Holy Spirit, is not to settle for speaking one language, even if most of the people we meet speak English. The call of the Gospel is to speak Jesus words of love and peace and freedom from fear in as many languages, and in as many ways, as there are grains of sand on a beach. The gift of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit comes to us all, as the prophet Joel said, in the language of our dreams and visions, a deep dialect of our own native language, and inspires us to dream more and share those dreams with others.

I don't want to make this sound easy. It's a gift, but it takes enormous effort to realize the potential of the gift. It requires a measure of humility and surrender on both sides of a conversation. Those apostles who spoke about God's deeds of power were using languages beyond their comfort zones. They risked ridicule and indifference. They somehow had to tap into a trust that what they were doing made a difference in that time and place. Meanwhile those Jews and proselytes in the crowd had to take a risk as well. They had to pause, listen, drop some very natural defenses. This was out of the ordinary, and it might become dangerous. It **was** dangerous to get into conversations with these Galileans.

Back in the year 2000, the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ started a study group to consider whether the Conference would adopt an Open and Affirming Resolution in Conference settings, making clear the full inclusion of LGBT people in ministry and service. Even though this would not be binding upon local churches (this is one of the wonderful quirks of UCC polity – if you want a course in it, I can give it sometime) it was a big deal. So a study group was formed under the leadership of the Conference Minister at that time, Arnold Thomas. Almost right away, talks broke down because people on the opposite ends of the opinion spectrum could not stand to speak to each other. It was too painful. So two groups were formed, each working in parallel tracks, to come up with wording for a resolution that each could tolerate. This is not the way I would have done it, but never mind. After months of work, the two groups sat down together a month before the annual meeting at which a resolution would be presented for a vote. They spent all day crafting words for one resolution- and they did it! As Arnold Thomas said, “Pentecost came early this year.” He was jubilant. But this is not the end of the story. One group went back and consulted with some outside folks and then said that they insisted on some new wording. The moment of unity passed. We did get an Open and Affirming Resolution that year, but it was an angry process and at least two churches left the Conference.

Can the lessons of Pentecost help at all here? Would there have been a way for people of different opinions at that table to speak in each others' own native language, the language of the heart, the language of pain, the language of fear, the language of hope? Was there a Spirit-infused way to stay in communion with people who disagreed? I don't know. The resolution itself recognizes the fallibility of its human composers with a final clause: "**BE IT RESOLVED** that the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ reaches this decision not because of what its members individually and separately are, but rather because of what its members in covenant, Conference and community with one another struggle to be: a Body of Christ..."

If the purpose of the Pentecost story was to homogenize everyone, then everyone in Jerusalem would have been converted to one language... a kind of reverse of the Tower of Babel story. But the native dialects did not go away. The message got through and become understandable to people of all languages. The people gathered on that day were not reduced to a homogenous mass: diversity was not diminished.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus foretold the coming of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. At his last meal with them, he promises that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate will teach them everything they need to know, and remind them of Jesus' words. "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything." The Advocate is usually thought of as the Advocate of the Christians who follow Jesus. But what if this teaching advocate is really advocating for the "other," teaching us "everything" we need to know to communicate with those who speak differently from us?

John's Gospel is about presence: not exclusion. The truth comes in many languages, not just an insiders' dialect. The gift of understanding wipes out the dialectic of "us and them", "my way or the highway," and the fear that makes us build enormous walls out of our distrust. As the preacher Nancy Rockwell said, "The man who was hung on a cross to die is just not a binary thinker." Jesus saw beyond our dispirited diversity to a brilliant spectrum of love. Beyond the binaries of male and female, foreign and native-born, rich and poor, each of us is more than a label.

I close with a prayer from Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth century woman who was abbess, mystic, author, naturalist, composer and correspondent with emperors and popes, who challenges all our binary notions of what is possible in our world.

Holy Spirit,  
Giving life to all life,  
Moving all creatures,  
Root of all things,  
Washing them clean,  
Wiping out their mistakes,  
Healing their wounds,  
You are our true life,  
Luminous, wonderful,  
Awakening the heart from its ancient sleep

Amen.