

“LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE”

Acts 2:1-14

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“Where is Pentecost not a commemoration on a calendar, with its red vestments and appointed readings, but an ongoing event?” Benjamin Dueholm asks this question in his commentary on this story in the *Christian Century*. We like Pentecost. It’s always been a Sunday that we bring something extra. Everyone wears red. Sometimes there are balloons. We have brought out the musical noisemakers that we play when we hear the word “spirit.” It’s a party, a celebration of the birth of the church, a day in which we mark the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But is it possible that we’ve lost some of its power as we focus on the first Pentecost?

Was Peter aware that this event was birthing the church? Why didn’t he and the 120 disciples with him mark this day by instituting a sacrament? Wasn’t it as important as the Lord’s supper? And why doesn’t anyone refer back to this day as the story of Acts continues? Well, if you read on, you will notice that the “outpouring of the Spirit” is not a single day, but an ongoing event. It’s an intriguing question: Have we restricted the work of the Spirit today by celebrating the “Day of Pentecost?”

The rush of a mighty wind, the tongues of flame, and the cacophony of different languages: have we reduced these to metaphors? Do we expect similar signs today? Do we listen for today’s dreamers and visionaries? Or are we content with the joyful acknowledgement of this important day marking the church’s beginning?

I am not the sort of person to be the life of a party, but I like this party. I enjoy this day in the church year. I find it uplifting and inspiring. And it should be! But... could it be more? Could we find in the celebration a different way of thinking about our present and ongoing witness to the mighty deeds of God?

It may help us to understand that this is in fact not the first Pentecost. Pentecost was and is a Jewish festival celebrating the early harvest. Jews are in Jerusalem to offer the first fruits at the temple as a thank-offering to God. It was a party before the Spirit made an appearance. The suggestion that the disciples are drunk is probably not offered in mockery, but as a likely explanation. So the Jews gathered are not looking for a new faith. They have one. They are not looking for meaning. They have a good sense of purpose in their lives. The disciples are not looking to take that away from them. They still see themselves as Jews.

If you look past the various manifestations of the Spirit, you will find that what they are offering is testimony to the present working of God. So that they can be understood, they

are speaking in the various languages of those who are present. They want their testimony to be heard and understood.

The disciples are not trying to make Christians out of Jews. They are not trying to institute a new festival. They are not inciting rebellion. They are calling for repentance, but not in any way inconsistent with Jewish faith.

Too many times in the church's history, we have not done testimony this way. We offered Muslims a choice between conversion or death by sword. We called on Native Americans to jettison their culture and religion in becoming Christians. We offer slaves a Bible excised of all the passages that might lead them to seek emancipation. We sent gay people to conversion therapy, told them they could offer leadership positions if they practiced celibacy. We insisted that Christian wives should stand by their abusive husbands. Dueholm writes, "Those of us in European-descended and colonial churches have been faced with our history not only of coercive evangelism but of identifying conversion to Christianity with the surrender of local culture."

The disciples spoke in a different language so that their testimony would be understood. If this was central to that first Pentecost, shouldn't it not only be celebrated, but also practiced? Don't new dreams and visions grow out of the effort to understand one another? If we are to be witness to the "mighty works of God" today shouldn't we be speaking a language that can be understood?

In this story, the translation happens immediately, but we know today that it's not that simple. We have good news to share, but can we put it in words to be understood by a transgendered youth being bullied? We've got good news, but do we know the language of grief well enough to put it into words for the grieving widow, the caretaker of someone with Alzheimer's, or the too-soon orphan. We've got good news, but do we understand the experience of those who suffer injustices well enough to speak a word of hope.

If our testimony is to have any effect, we need to understand the experiences of those who are different from us. We need to be non-invasive, offering grace without expectation of conformity to our standard, We need to be careful about mistaking privilege for blessing, our identity for human identity, and self-righteousness for truth. Our testimony to the goodness of God must never come off as a judgment of others. We should not be like the Pharisee in one of Jesus' parables who thanked God that he was not like that sinner over there.

I know that if I went on in this way for very long, you would soon despair of sharing the good news at all for fear of doing more harm than good. Even with people we know really well, we sometimes speak different languages. In the end, maybe we don't cross that bridge of understanding without the outpouring of the Spirit. For certain, our testimony needs the blessing of the Spirit.

But this does not release us from the hard work of learning another language. Human community can only flourish when we place understanding above ego. It isn't helpful to observe that black people are always angry. For one thing, it isn't true, certainly not of all black people and certainly not of any black person all the time. Instead of being the bystander judging other, ask why. And if you can't find a black person to tell you why, listen to the news, read a book, look it up on the internet. If you don't understand how a person in a boy's body thinks of herself as a girl, there are people and resources to help with this. It is so dangerous to allow the dominant culture to shape the language of our witness. It is just this thing that has given Christian faith such a bad name in many circles.

The church will thrive not when it celebrates Pentecost, but when it practices Pentecost. If we will make a good faith effort to learn other languages, to seek understanding, I think we will find that the Spirit will bless our witness. God is good... all the time. Amen.

Resource:

Benjamin J. Dueholm. "Living the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary" *Christian Century*, May 5, 2021 p.21.