

Sermon – Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-21
May 20, 2018

“What Language Do You Speak”

On my first day at seminary, in my introductory Greek class, the professor Dr. Jim Boyce asked each student to tell him two things - our name and “*how many languages you can speak.*” I’m not kidding – the man said *languages!* When it came my turn, I told him I knew “*market Swahili.*” When he asked what that meant I told him I could say ‘hi’ and bargain for rice, oranges and eggplant at open-air markets in Tanzania and not make a complete fool of myself. How that would translate into success in an ancient language was unclear. The look on Dr. Boyce face told me probably not too much!

Marcella and I had gone to Tanzania five years earlier as ELCA missionaries and we began, as you might expect, at a language school. She and I picked up a few words after a few weeks and eventually we could plan out a few phrases that we wanted to say. All that preparation flew out the window on weekends when we went to town and had real Swahili speakers say something back to us. Often we had to walk away from questions we didn’t understand rather than try to respond with words we likely didn’t have.

We were speakers of words but limited understanding when spoken to. That’s the way it works with a language – the harder part is comprehension not vocabulary – which includes the language of faith. Today Kian, Bobby and Rebecca will affirm their faith. We’ve given them a basic vocabulary of the Christian faith – the creed, the prayer and the commandments. We’ve asked them a lot of questions over the years. Now a few questions remain for them as well as you who once likewise made your confession - will your vocabulary of faith continue to grow, comprehend questions asked of it and give those questions reasonably faithful answers?

You know the creed, the prayer and the commandments, but when a real someone sends a real question your way about God and suffering in a world we confess was created good; forgiveness and new life we confess was won at a terrible cost – Jesus’ life; or righteousness (a Christian way of life) through the Holy Spirit a lot of people may not find much different what the Boy Scouts teach – would you have something to say?

On Pentecost real Parthians and Arabs and Cretins and Romans were spoken to by Peter as a sign that the church was fulfilling the commission Jesus gave it to witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and unto the ends of the earth as Acts 1:7-8 says. But Acts has more story to tell and it goes on to describe how real Parthian, Arab and Roman objections and questions about Christianity would be heard and need to be answered before they would become ones themselves. The gift of the Holy Spirit wasn’t just speech. It brings the ability to listen in order to understand *how* the language of faith and the gospel of Jesus can be heard.

The grace of God becoming believable required more than a few first-year Apostles being able to speak some “*market Cappadocian or Pamphylian*”. It’s one thing to have our beloved confessions and prayers and hymns, and say them, in faith, in worship. It’s quite another to have the spiritual gift to hear more than just what we listen for and understand only what interests and not what also challenges us. The delight of the church in every age is to proclaim the Word of Life - Jesus Christ. The duty of the church is to listen well, lest we offer answers to questions that people aren’t presently asking.

So now I’ll ask you –*what languages of the Bible do you speak?* That’s right – pastor just said “languages”! Do you speak the language of charity? May and June are our “mission servant months.” Our congregation has heard some wonderful organizations in our community say; “*can you help us help others.*” What answer will you give? Yes, a checkbook can speak volumes and yours can help us say resoundingly – ‘*yes, in Jesus name we can.*’

What languages of the Bible do you speak? Can you speak by listening fluently to someone who grieves because you have grieved...is depressed because you have been... is having long nights and anxious days because they’re out of ideas and energy trying to find work or reconcile with a child? Can you hear them and understand what they’re saying - the questions they’re asking? Your experience can speak volumes. A new ministry here at Calvary can use the language you speak – the language of compassion – our Stephen Ministry.

What languages of the Bible do you speak? Last year I was driving high schoolers from our congregation to St. Louis for a week of service through a ministry called Youth Works. What I’d heard of St. Louis indicated that we’d encounter a quite a desert of need there – but I also remembered Jesus said “cups of cold water” were confessions of faith – so we went. A couple of hours into the trip down it got quiet in the van so I looked in the rear-view mirror and realized conversations were going on and music playing even though I didn’t hear a thing! No, my hearing hasn’t gotten that bad. The music was playing through iPhone earbuds and conversations happening via text messages.

The only way I knew something was happening was when I saw lips moving silently to some song and thumbs whizzing over a keypad. And it dawned on me that I was having sort of a Pentecost moment. Language was streaming everywhere if I couldn’t make it out. So when we arrived and got out of our van in St. Louis we spoke, maybe a little, maybe quite a lot, about a gospel of “cups of cold water” and such. Acts says on Pentecost people heard “*the wonders of God*” spoken to them. And they asked “*what does this mean?*” What a privilege to be able to answer by saying the Jesus who loves you, loves them too. AMEN