

May 23, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby
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[Acts 2: 1-12](#) & [Romans 8:22-27](#)

“Two nations, divided by a common tongue.” That’s what Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw famously said when asked about the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom. Since then, this quip has been used by English speakers around the world to say that while we all technically speak the same language, we don’t speak it the same way. And it’s not just about accents, dialects, or spelling “honor” [honour] with or without a “u” – usage of phrases and concepts can be completely opposed, too. For instance, during the second world war, the leadership of the UK and US were stymied by the phrase, “table a discussion.” For the British, “tabling” an item meant bringing it to the table to discuss immediately – while the Americans were used to “tabling” an item by setting it aside to consider at a later meeting. Discussion went around for minutes, frustration levels rising, before the leadership finally understood what was happening.

In the Bible, there’s a famous story of Noah’s descendants, who wanted to build a tower so high that it would allow you to walk into the heavens, if you kept climbing it. They came from all over to build the tower, and they were working together efficiently and well, due to sharing a common language. God saw what they were doing, and shattered the language, so that no one could understand each other. Once they were divided by language, the people scattered across the earth, abandoning the construction of the tower, which the Hebrew Bible calls “Balal,” meaning “confusion.” Following an ancient tradition, “Balal” is associated with “Babylon,”¹ and so this story is usually referred to as the “Tower of Babel.” We English speakers, highly influenced by the Bible, took this story and ran with it, creating the verb “to babble” – to speak unintelligibly, either in nonsense syllables or too swiftly to be understood.

¹ There’s some evidence that “Babylon” derives from Akkadian “bab-ilim” meaning “Gate of God.” – but it is entirely possible that this, too, is a folk etymology of a pre-Akkadian name “Babilla,” of which little is currently known.

This mutual unintelligibility, is of course, still with us today, in the estimated 7000 languages of Earth still spoken. But the Bible also tells us of a time when the Holy Spirit bridged over the division of tongues – fifty days after the Passover celebration that Jesus shared with his disciples. *Pentekoste*, meaning “fiftieth” [day] in Greek, is the first day of the wheat harvest festival, traditionally celebrated as well as a remembrance of Moses coming down off of the mountain with the Word of God. On this particular Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples had gathered to celebrate together, when a roaring wind was heard, and tongues of fire descended on the gathering. Those touched by the tongues of fire started speaking in other tongues, as the Holy Spirit filled them.

Tongues of fire, tongues of speech.² While this may sound like an accidental pun in English, it’s a direct translation of the Greek pun of the text! Now, the disciples aren’t just speaking in random tongues – instead, they are heard by a large crowd, each in their own language. This crowd, drawn by the loud roaring wind, was made up of pilgrims from all around the world who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival. While many would have spoken Greek, the *lingua franca*³ of the time, they also came from parts of the world where Greek was a second or even third language! To hear, then, the “wonderful things that God has done” not in a distant translation, but in their own native tongue – this was an amazing, miraculous event.

The miracle of Pentecost is often told as an opposite to the Tower of Babel – God’s shattering of language undone in a unity of purpose. But, note that the disciples are not speaking one language, but many. It’s not that each person gathered there is able to speak some tongue in common – but that each is hearing their own language, their own heartwords, warmed by the tongues of fire. It is a celebration of diversity, an honoring of the authentic self of each gathered there that day. It is God, telling us that, God sees us, God loves us, God knows us so well

² “Language” is a Latin borrowing, from *Lingua* meaning... tongue. The old English word is either *wyrt* (word), *tunge* (tongue), or *spraec* (speech), depending on context.

³ Lit, “tongue of the Franks”, used in the 17th-20th centuries to indicate the language of diplomacy, since most courtiers in Europe spoke French. It was the “common tongue” of the time.

as to speak in our language. God loves *you* – you as you were, who you are, who you will be. The wonders that the disciples speak of – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – that’s our story, too, even after the tongues of fire fade and we no longer hear our own native tongue.

I imagine that after the Pentecost miracle subsided, there was a sense of disappointment at the disconnection and division of dialogue.⁴ Paul speaks obliquely about this, though writing before Luke composed the Pentecost story in the book of Acts. Paul writes, “We ourselves, who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free... We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit pleads our case with unexpressed groans.” When we don’t know what to say, we trust that the Spirit understands even what we can’t speak, and speaks to us in the same way.

Yes, we are divided by a common tongue – but we are united by the Spirit of God, who understands us more deeply than language itself. Let’s remember this as we move into a post-pandemic world and encounter world travelers and far-flung vacationers as well as loquacious locals – when we just can’t understand someone for all the differences we may have, trust that the Spirit of God understands them, too, and that God is working in their life as surely as yours.

May the Holy One help you to see the fire of God’s love in everyone you meet. May the stories of Jesus fall from your tongue as you engage the world in dialogue. And may the Holy Spirit always be speaking to you with in your heartwords, letting you know that you are a beloved child of God. Amen.

⁴ Lit, “through-tongue” in Greek