

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Bethany Ulrich

May 23, 2021

Language. It's important. It facilitates communication, understanding. Relationship. And when we don't understand the language, we can feel misunderstood and completely lost!

I remember when I first moved to Mexico City, it was a daily practice for all the employees to eat lunch together. Seven or eight people would all gather, share food and share lively conversation. And I remember those first weeks feeling pretty lost because I couldn't understand everything being said at that lunch table. It felt vulnerable at that table, kind of scary - and I wondered if that language gulf between us would ever be closed.

Language is important. It plays a key role in the Acts passage today. But sometimes it's not just language that does this to us, that can make us feel like complete outsiders. *Even when we speak the same language-* sometimes, we STILL don't understand one another.

In our text today, people came from many regions of the world for an annual harvest festival. They surely spoke different languages, but ALSO, surely, there was a lot more than that set them apart from one another. They most likely wore different clothes. Perhaps they had different ways of greeting one another. Different rules around who speaks to who. Perhaps some had women in their caravans while others did not. Some may have had slaves or servants, while others did not. Some were young and some were old.

There is no doubt that it wasn't just language that divided them or created potential barriers between them that day. Today too, language is not the only thing that separates.

Even when we speak the same language, we still find ways to create barriers that tend to keep some people in, while keeping others out. That can make people feel oceans and miles away from one another.

Sometimes, in the church, terminology and rituals (even though they are in our native language English) might make us feel like outsiders if we don't automatically know what those terms mean or how to participate in the rituals. I remember one church, where there were numbers for everything. A page number in one book for certain prayers and creeds and other page numbers for ANOTHER book with hymns. Maybe It was just me, but it took me a while to figure this out and I often couldn't get on the right page before they moved on to the next piece of the service.

Unfortunately, all types and denominations of churches can fall into the trap of creating VERY subtle barriers that create insiders- those who come every week, grew up in that tradition, are well versed in the lingo and language (and even page numbers!) of that community. And the outsiders- people who many times are visitors or folks who aren't used to the traditions of that community, or perhaps who speak differently, dress differently, come from different places.

On that first Pentecost day, there were a lot of differences and potential for that insider and outsider dynamic. I LOVE that the first act of the Spirit in the early church was to erase that first line of division- language.

I wonder if those gathered felt like I did the day, after about 2 or 2.5 years of those daily lunches, when suddenly realized, "Wait a minute, I can understand everything being said right now!" I wonder if they felt the sense of inclusion I felt when I could finally be an active participant in those conversations and not just sit by and listen for a word or two that I understood. I wonder if they sighed with *amazement* like I did that day, when I realized that with time, patience, and lots of vulnerability and courage to keep going to those lunches- a barrier had slowly come down.

And that's not all the Spirit did that day the church was born. The amazing thing about the Spirit descending on this assembled group, is that not only did the Spirit help everyone to understand, but she brought down barriers IN ADDITION TO language.

The Spirit brought equal *understanding* to all, equal *access to knowledge* for all. In a sense, the Spirit equalized ALL who were there. The Spirit put them all on the same playing field. Gave them ALL the same tools to work with. No one had an advantage over the other. NOT. ONE.

As the prophet Joel declared- the Spirit was poured out on **everyone**- even people who were otherwise forgotten about or left on the outside of gatherings like this. The prophet declared: I will pour out my Spirit upon **all** flesh. The prophet goes on to name sons AND daughters, young AND old, slave AND free. **All people** will receive the Spirit.

And, when the Spirit was present, **all people** had access to the good news of God's love, of God's deeds on earth.

Just as the Spirit breathed new life into the gathered community by breaking down barriers to engagement/to understanding... the Spirit continues to do this today! The Spirit continues to move us, to put the wind and the fire in us to speak across languages and all the things that separate us.

Maybe you haven't felt that rush of wind of the Spirit lately or felt that heat under your feet lately. But perhaps you've felt discomfort. Or vulnerability. Or fear of something new. Like when I sat at that lunch table, not understanding anything. All these things can ACTUALLY point us to where the Spirit is at work. To where new life in God can be found.

The equalizing work of God through the Spirit is indeed all around us- breaking down barriers in language and all kinds of things we never imagined could be broken down.

Especially during the pandemic!

- I've seen the Spirit breaking barriers as more and more churches and church bodies are able to provide simultaneous interpretation in multiple languages at one time! This technology has allowed mini Pentecosts everyday around the world!
- The Spirit has been breaking down barriers through digital church ministries that have brought the Word of God to people through internet livestream services and meetings who otherwise wouldn't dare walk into a church building
- The Spirit has broken down physical barriers of church walls as congregations have held services from their parking lots on the radio with preachers preaching *outside* for all the passersby to see (like this service at St. Marks in Worth IL).

It hasn't been *easy* to do these things: to learn digital platforms, to preach and worship outside. But when the Spirit is leading to new life, the Spirit often leads us to something new and something risky, that requires **vulnerability** and even **courage**.

Just like the vulnerability that it takes to speak a new language or to try out a few words that you know in another language. Or like the courage that it takes to let down a barrier that we unknowingly are holding up in the church and even church walls themselves- that have kept some on the *outside* of our church communities.

Dear friends, as we move into the next phase of the pandemic we are living in, may we bravely follow the barrier-breaking that is upon us already. Even if it's tough. Even if it feels awkward. Or scary. Or vulnerable. May we follow God's Spirit that is bringing all people closer to God's deeds of love and new life.

AMEN.