

“Other Tongues”ⁱ
Shannon Smythe
May 23, 2021
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

One of my dear friends and mentors, Jack Levison, whose book, *Fresh Air: The Holy Spirit for an Inspired Life*, will form the basis of our upcoming adult ed course, “The Holy Spirit I Never Knew,” says that today’s Pentecost passage from Acts offers a “clinic in ecstasy.” Jack notes that if we were first- or second-century Roman readers, we’d detect, right off the bat in this story an “inspired loss of control.” Luke, the writer not just of the Gospel according to Luke but also of the Acts of the Apostles, wanted his readers to connect the dots between the presence of pneuma, God’s spirit-breath, to the typical signs of ecstasy and pandemonium in that day, fire and drunkenness, as a way to put Pentecost on a pedestal.

The big surprise comes, however, when Luke drops in one single little unexpected word, which takes the ecstasy and pandemonium associated in the mind of his Roman readers, with the imagery of fire and prophecy and drunkenness, in an unexpected and entirely inspired direction (pun intended). Rather than saying Jesus’ followers “spoke in tongues,” Luke narrates the ecstatic story in a new direction: they “spoke in *other* tongues.”

When the Spirit comes, there will be prophecy, there will be fire, there will be wind. There will be actions that look like drunkenness. Yes. That was all more or less expected, as strange as we might find all those signifiers today. But the really new thing that comes with the Spirit on that momentous Pentecost is that there were other tongues.

Other tongues. This is the new thing. My favorite theologian, Willie Jennings, says it this way: “The Miracle of Pentecost is less in the hearing and much more in the speaking. Disciples speak in the mother tongues of others, not by their own design but by the Spirit’s desire.” Jennings calls this Pentecost miracle “the revolution of the intimate.” I absolutely love that. When the Spirit comes at Pentecost it is to break open the community of faith in new and revolutionary ways. This is not anything those followers of Jesus, who had been patiently waiting and praying in expectation for the promise from God, could have or would have set up for themselves. The Spirit, after all, just like the wind, cannot be controlled.

I’ve come to a new appreciation not only of the great power of the wind, but also its uncontrollability since moving to the Cape region. I’ve heard a few of you who are newer to this area remark about the wind, too. “No structure is stronger than the wind and there is nothing beyond its touch” (Jennings). Yet how “much greater is the reality of the Spirit than this weak metaphor?”

The power and uncontrollability of the Spirit are all driving towards one crucial reality of life: language. “This is God touching, taking hold of tongue and voice, mind, heart, and body” (Jennings). What happens when the Spirit makes followers of Jesus to speak in the tongues of other peoples is an unprecedented, unanticipated, unwanted, yet complete joining

(Jennings). We saw this two weeks ago with the Gentile Pentecost initiated with Cornelius and his household. The Spirit joins together those who would never have joined themselves to one another on their own. God joins. God's work is that of joining, creating belonging, bringing new community, new desire, new intimacy into existence where once it all was formless and void. In Genesis we are told that the Spirit-breath of God was brooding over the formless void and then from that void, God brought life. God created the cosmos and into that came intimacy with God as God breathed God's own breath into humans giving us life.

Language, too, represents something very intimate and personal for a person. Language signals culture, memory, life. To "speak a language is to speak a people" (Jennings). To be able to speak a language indicates that there is familiarity, connection, and relationality. That the Spirit causes the followers of Jesus to speak in other tongues than their mother tongues shows us what we in the Christian church have too often forgotten: that the very existence of the church was birthed out of this revolutionary intimacy that brings with it deep belonging.

Consider this: When those followers of Jesus, who were all in one place, waiting in expectation for the promise of God, for some forty days after the world changing resurrection of Jesus from the dead, they were not imagining or hoping that the power they would receive from the Holy Spirit would enable them to speak someone else's language. That is not what they were expecting. It was not the desire of their hearts. I find this very instructive for the church today. Because I wonder what we desire when we think about waiting expectantly for the power and promise of the Spirit. What do we desire? When we talk about what we desire for the church sometimes what I have heard are: more members, young families, a revitalized church, more pledges, or maybe just church the way we remember it in its glory days.

The Pentecost text helps us learn anew about the desires of the Spirit. The Spirit often desires something unexpected and different from us. The Spirit desires and gives us the ability to speak in other tongues. We may not expect it or ask for it. And yet it comes.

What happens when you learn a new language? To speak another language requires submission to a people. When a person sets out to learn another language, they must submit to someone else's voice, and learn what words mean in a different context. Words are always "bound to events, songs, sayings, jokes, everyday practices, habits of mind and body, all within a different land and the journey of another people. Anyone who has learned a language other than their native tongue knows how humbling learning can be. An adult, in the slow and often arduous efforts of pronunciation, may be reduced to a child, and a child at home in that language may become the teacher of an adult. And then there is always that crucial moment in the learning of any language, if one wishes to reach fluency, that enunciation requirements and repetition must give way to sheer wanting. Some people learn a language out of gut-wrenching determination born out of necessity. Most, however, who enter a life-time of fluency, do so because at some point in time they learn to love it. They fall in love with the sounds. The language sounds beautiful to them. And if that love is complete, they fall in love with its original signifiers. They come to love the people—the

food, the faces, the plans, the practices, the songs, the poetry, the happiness, the sadness, the ambiguity, the truth—and they also love the place . . . that those people call . . . their home” (Jennings).

Just like I spoke of God as the original dreamer, so God is also the original fluent speaker. God speaks people fluently. “And God, with all the urgency that is with the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently too” (Jennings). And so, as we come this year, once again, to Pentecost Sunday, this marvelous day when we are reminded of the inauguration of the great revolution of the intimate, by the Spirit’s power, let us at Westminster consider what it means for us to be a church that speaks people fluently too.

If we look around at one another and at our space and the forms of our gathering and our worship, what signs do we see that we are speaking in other tongues? Are such signs missing? What primacy are we giving to the desire of God to have us learn the language of peoples who are different than us? Can we understand today that there may be new ways to think of “other tongues”? Maybe the Spirit wants us to speak someone else’s mother tongue of technology? Maybe social media? Maybe other expressions of creating belonging and meaning or different forms of expressing spirituality? Are we willing to humble ourselves, to submit ourselves to the posture required to learn a new language? Can we acknowledge that the reason we should want to do this is because it is a way to learn to speak people different than ourselves fluently? If we don’t want to do this, can we simply begin by asking God to mold and shape our desires to that of God’s Spirit so that a new intimacy might be born anew in this place? Come, Holy Spirit, come. Break us open to others and others’ tongues! Do your powerful and uncontrollable work among us. Amen.

¹ This sermon was made all the richer for the wonderful scholarship of Jack Levison and Willie James Jennings. I drew quotes from chapter 8 of Jack’s book *Fresh Air: The Holy Spirit for an Inspired Life* and from Willie’s commentary on Acts 2:1-13 in his commentary, *Acts*, which is in the commentary series *Belief, a Theological Commentary on the Bible*.