

May 31, 2020 We are Together in One Place Acts 2:1-21 Caledon East United Church Rev. Ross Leckie

What energy the children displayed at the virtual Messy Church event, held on Zoom last Thursday. We were using the theme, “the Pentecost story”. The activities we had them experience brought to life some elements of that memorable gathering in Jerusalem—wind, fire, amazing transformations—so many different languages being spoken, but they could understand one another.

What excitement there is to this day. The birth of the church! The descent of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had talked about with his disciples, the Counselor, the Advocate. Jesus had said to the disciples, “well, I have to go and you will be glad, for I will send you this most wonderful gift, the Spirit that will be with you forever.”

But, just a minute. Some of you have puzzled looks. “When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.” I see some of you ‘scratching your heads’, perhaps wondering why I called this meditation, “we are together in one place”, when of course, we are not together today in the church sanctuary and that seems strange and even sad. In a literal sense, many of us can’t relate to what the sentence describes, right at the moment. Because of Covid-19, it is not wise, not safe for us to be “together in one place.” We’re confined to our homes, we can’t gather for prayer and fellowship, and we don’t know when we’ll share bread and wine again around a common table. It feels difficult to contemplate togetherness — much less celebrate a great feast day like Pentecost — in this reality.

But in another sense, we *are* in one place. Writer Debie Thomas suggests, “We are in a hard place. A hollow place. A place of vulnerability and grief. We are together in our uncertainty. Together in our loss. Together in our hopes and fears. Across all sorts of distances — geographical, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic — we are bound together as one people, one humanity, one planet, facing a common threat that knows no borders. Like the disciples in our Gospel reading for this week, we are huddled together behind locked doors, waiting for Jesus to come among us and say, “Peace be with you.” Waiting for him to breathe on us. Waiting for him to speak the words we need so desperately: *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”*”

The story, writer Luke describes is a fantastical one, full of details that challenge the imagination. Tongues of fire. Rushing wind. Bold preaching. Mass baptism. But at its heart, the Pentecost story is not about spectacle and drama. It’s about the Holy Spirit showing up and transforming ordinary, imperfect, frightened people into the Body of Christ. It’s about God disrupting and disorienting our everyday ways of engaging the sacred, so that something new and holy can be born within and among us. It’s about the Spirit carrying us out of suspicion, tribalism, and fear, into a radical new way of engaging God and our neighbour.

Luke tells us that the disciples were “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” “At this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.”

Those of you who speak more than one language might be the best equipped to grasp the significance of this miraculous moment. Those of you who are bilingual (or better yet, well versed in many languages) understand that a language equals far more than the sum of its grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Languages carry the full weight of their respective cultures, histories, psychologies, and spiritualities. To speak one language as opposed to another is to orient oneself differently in the world — to see differently, hear differently, process and punctuate reality differently.

I heard a simple example of a different perspective on things the other day. Our young adults with significant peer pressure and living in this consumer driven society, seek a perfect wedding if they find that life-long partner. They spend thousands for the right look and pray for a bright sunny day, but not too bright to ‘wash out’ the hundreds of photographs. One bride was devastated to exit the church to a pouring thunderstorm. Her groom, from a different culture, Nigeria, viewed that rain as a refreshing blessing, a sign of new beginnings in a dry land.

Has there been a time in our lives when we’ve been so desperate for a brave new perspective, such a need for border-crossing ways than we desperately need right now? Is this not a factor in the current outbreak of reaction to racist attitudes in society—partly in reaction to a terrible incident in Minneapolis, Minnesota this past week? As the world grows more and more tribal; as nations, cities, and even faith communities turn on each other out of suspicion and selfishness; as we’re forced by the pandemic to physically separate from those around us, can it be that God desires to pour out the Holy Spirit on us, so that we might learn new and life-giving ways of being the Church, being the Body, being Love incarnate for a frightened and imperiled world? What languages do we need to speak right now

that we've never spoken before? Where does the fire need to fall, to burn away all that hinders us from being bearers of Good News in this dark time?

The pandemic has exposed the deep inequities of our existing systems and opened the pathway to leave these inequities behind us. We need a broad transformation of society, one that doesn't continue the injustices of the past or the present.

When the disciples and their friends began to speak in foreign languages, the crowds gathered outside their meeting place understood them. And *this* — the *fact of their comprehension* — was what confused them. They were not confused by the message itself; the message came through with perfect clarity in their various languages.

What the crowds found baffling was that God would in effect 'come down' to speak to them in their own mother-tongues. That he would welcome them so intimately, with words and expressions hearkening back to their birthplaces, their childhoods, their beloved cities, countries, and cultures of origin. As if to say, "This Spirit-drenched place, this fledgling church, this new Body of Christ, is yours. You don't have to feel like outsiders here; we speak your language, too. Come in. Come in and feel at home."

What I'm particularly thinking about on this 2020 Pentecost, is that the words and languages unleashed at Pentecost required surrender and humility on *both* sides. Those who spoke had to brave languages far beyond their comfort zones. They had to risk vulnerability in the face of difference, and do so with no guarantee of welcome. They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them — new words, strange words, scary words — were words precisely ordained for the time and place they occupied. Meanwhile, the crowds who listened had to take risks as well. They had to suspend disbelief, drop their cherished defenses, and opt for wonder instead of contempt. They had to widen their inner circles, and welcome strangers with accents into their midst.

Not all of them managed it — some sneered because they couldn't bear to be bewildered, to have their neat categories of belonging and exclusion explode in their faces. Instead, like their ancestors at Babel, who scattered at the first sign of difference, they retreated into the well-worn narrative of denial: "Nothing new is happening here. This isn't God. These are blubbing idiots who've had too much to drink." But even in that atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism, some people spoke, and some people listened, and into those astonishing exchanges, God breathed fresh life.

Something happens when we speak each other's languages. Perhaps you have tried your high school French on a visit to Quebec or somewhere on travels to Europe. We experience the limits of our own words and perspectives. We learn curiosity. We discover that God's "great deeds" are far too nuanced for a single tongue, a single fluency.

I hope that the Pentecost story compels us, because it's a story for *this* time, *this* moment. As we continue to face the coronavirus pandemic as people of faith, we will be tempted to grow complacent, or to despair, or to turn in on ourselves and forget that we are part of a much larger whole. We live in a world where words have become toxic, where the languages of so many cherished "isms" threaten to divide and destroy us. The troubles of our day are global, civilizational, catastrophic. If we don't learn the art of speaking across the borders that currently separate us, we will burn ourselves down to ash.

It is no small thing that the Holy Spirit loosened tongues to break down barriers on the birthday of the Church. In the face of difference, God compelled his people to engage. In the face of fear, Jesus breathed forth peace. Out of the heart of deep difference, God birthed the Church. So happy birthday, sisters and brothers. Receive the Holy Spirit. Together, may we grow into all that Christ longs to pour into us, his Body.

Acknowledging Inspiration from:

Thomas, Debie, [Journey with Jesus](#) blog, May 24, 2020