

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Day of Pentecost, May 24, 2015

The Universal Language of Christ

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May 24, 2015

Acts 2:1-21

In my former work I travelled all over the world. I frequently hopped from one country to another and generally could not speak the language of the country I was visiting. I almost wished that like the disciples in today's scripture reading from Acts that I could speak in tongues.

One trip took me to France, then to Hungary and then to Lithuania --- three totally different countries with languages which had absolutely no similarity at all. Another trip took me to Austria, Slovakia, Spain and Finland. Again there were no language similarities. It was mind boggling but I managed well enough thanks to the fact that almost everywhere I went, I found people who could speak English who would translate for me or give me guidance.

Lithuania was one place where I could stumble along better than in most countries because my mother was Lithuanian and as a child I spoke the language, all be it rather simplistically, and I did remember some of the language while I was there. But Hungarian, Finnish, and the others --- forget it.

To show you how bad it was, on my first trip to England I was chatting with a British woman when she interrupted me and said, "You speak darn good English for a foreigner." You see, we don't speak English in this country. We speak American and believe me it is very different than the way people speak in Great Britain.

In any event, having visited over 70 countries and even having attended church services in languages I didn't understand such as Afrikaans, I was always fortunate enough to be with someone who could explain things to me, although I must admit that the church services didn't require a translator. The language of Christ is universal. That is what people found out at Pentecost --- the language of Christ is universal no matter what language we speak.

Our scripture reading this morning really describes the beginning of the Church in what literally was a hurricane and firestorm of glory. The Jews were gathered at the

Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate what the Old Testament calls the Feast or Festival of Weeks, a festival which was celebrated annually 50 days after the Feast of the First Fruits, Passover, in the Jewish liturgical calendar. It was a feast of joy and thanksgiving for the harvest season.

People came from all over the known world to celebrate and the cacophony of languages being spoken and shouted around the city and in the Temple must have been incredible. It would have been as if people from all of the countries that I have visited were gathered in one place at the same time all trying to communicate with each other simultaneously.

Into this confusion came Christ's disciples to join in the celebration. They had gathered at one house when something like a hurricane-force wind came to where they were sitting and tongues of fire appeared and rested on each of them. At first they were terror stricken but that quickly changed when what appeared to be tongues of fire rested on them. Terror changed to amazement as they began to speak in languages that they had never spoken before. These were not learned men. They were fishermen, not scholars, and now they could speak the sixteen different foreign languages mentioned in our scripture reading.

I had a friend in Holland who could speak about that many languages but he had a great skill for language and could study a language and learn it in a relatively short time. But the disciples didn't have that skill, not at all. Yet, suddenly when the Holy Spirit descended upon them, they could communicate the Gospel of Jesus in every language. John Calvin noted that at Pentecost, "*a punishment for human pride (referring to the confusion of language at Babel) was transformed into a means of blessing.*"

James Brashler in *The Presbyterian Outlook* commented that, at Pentecost, Jerusalem was a magnet for devout Jews from all over the Mediterranean world. He stated that "*Luke may be exaggerating just a little when he says they came 'from every nation under heaven.'*"

Luke's purpose was to emphasize the universal scope of the good news which was being proclaimed by the disciples, the universal language of Christ. Far more important than the number of languages the disciples spoke was what they said.

Luke reports in Acts two very different responses to what the disciples were

saying to the people. Some people were surprised and perplexed. They didn't understand what this miracle meant and many wanted to learn more about Jesus' life and resurrection.

Other people however thought that the disciples were drunk, which was not an uncommon thing when people were celebrating. Peter replied to them that it was still early in the morning, that they had not been drinking wine and were indeed sober, and he cited the prophet Joel to explain that what the people were seeing was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and indeed it was. Peter linked the prophecy of Joel and the gift of the Holy Spirit with Jesus' *"life, death, resurrection and ascension.*

*"Peter's message found its way into the hearts of over 3,000 who responded by repenting and being baptized in the name of Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit."*¹

In one day, thousands were brought to Christ. It was indeed the birth of the Church.

In today's world, we can't expect to have such phenomenal success at bring people to Christ but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try.

We don't have a language problem as the disciples did and we do speak the universal language of Christ.

Go forth into the community and tell your friends and neighbors about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, just as did the disciples at Pentecost. We Presbyterians are often referred to as the "frozen chosen." We tend to keep our faith to ourselves. We are loathe to tell others about our faith. We find it to be awkward --- but we need to do it. Go forth and talk about Christ. Some of the people you may talk to may think that you have had too much wine to drink, but some will listen.

Talk to them and invite them to visit with us and to worship with us. That is how the disciples grew the faith in the first place and that is how we can grow this church. If we don't do that, this church will slowly go out of existence. Get out there and speak the universal language of Christ.

Amen.

1. Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Holman Reference, Nashville, TN 2003