

## **Lost in Translation**

Rev. Curtis Preston

Pentecost A Confirmation Sunday

May 11, 2008

I Corinthians 12: 4-13, Acts 2: 1-21

I didn't always know that I would be a minister. I had entertained the idea, on and off, throughout high school, but by the time I'd graduated from college I had decided that while I loved the church, I would like to work in social services, preferably working with youth. I figured I could still join a church, and perhaps be a Sunday school teacher or a youth group leader. After being turned down for a job as a social worker working with homeless families, I took a job in working at a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed adolescents. It was a job where I could help people, work with youth, I had some friends that worked there, and it kind of used my degree in sociology. It seemed like a good fit. Well, within six months it became clear that I was not cut out for work in residential treatment. While the work was meaningful, it was also hard, and I discovered that I was slowly changing. I was becoming calloused to the histories and stories of the youth. I was frustrated by their lack of progress. I was tired of being lied to, yelled at and spit on, tired of being tense all the time for fear that one of the youth would do or say something which would start a fight or put them in danger. In short I was losing hope.

Because it was a government-funded facility, talking religion was completely off limits. Because I had read their case files, because I knew what they had done and what had been done to them, in my heart of hearts I knew they needed to hear about grace, about forgiveness, about resurrection and new life, about reconciliation and starting over, about gifts and spirit and possibility, about promise and covenant and about love—about a love so big that nothing we could do could separate us from it. I came to realize that the things I wanted to talk about were things I'd learned about during confirmation, at church camp, and in every church I'd ever been a part of. I discovered that the language of the church was my primary language—my native tongue--and that it didn't fit particularly well with residential treatment. So I applied to seminary and a few months later, Danielle and I moved to Berkeley, CA so I could attend the

Pacific School of Religion and begin training for a life in ministry where I could learn to become fluent in the language of the church.

In today's familiar lesson from the second chapter in Acts, we hear again of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It comes as a rush of a violent wind, and divided tongues of fire appeared to Jews and Jewish followers of Jesus, and a tongue rested on each one of them. And all of them began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability. The people speak to and hear one another and they understand each other. And what is the people's response to the ability to understand each other? Bewilderment. Astonishment. They are baffled and confused. Amazed and perplexed they said to one another, "what does this mean?" They were so used to not understanding one another, that understanding each other comes as a surprise. "But what does it mean?" they asked. It is a good question. What does this mean, that through the work of the Holy Spirit, those who have little in common, those who do not speak the same language and certainly don't see the world the same way, are able to understand one another? And do you believe that if the Holy Spirit can make it possible for Cappadocians and Pamphylians, and Parthians to understand one another, then through the Holy Spirit all of us gathered on this day, in this place, might understand one another? Wouldn't that be something? Sure we all speak the same language, but do we really understand one another? Do you get the allure of text messaging? Do you know what a victory garden was? Do you love or hate email as a form of communication? What did it feel like to have a draft card? Are you overjoyed or frustrated that most people of my generation and younger go to the web for news and information instead of reading a newspaper? Do we like the same music, or watch the same TV shows, or read the same books? Do we see world events through the same lens? So then, is it anything short of a miracle that there still exists at least on place in our society where three and four generations of people get together week after week to speak ancient words, and sing new words to ancient tunes, and hear old stories in new ways, and to tell timeless truths with one another? How could this all be, if it weren't for the Holy Spirit?

On Pentecost long ago they asked, "How is it that we understand one another, despite significant differences?" And some sneered and said they are filled with wine. There was then, as there are now, those who doubt, those who don't get what is happening in churches across

this country, folks who think we've lost our minds, or left the critical parts of our brains at the door, or think the church is about greed, and power, and easy answers. Some believe church is about thinking the same, and speaking the same, and seeing the same, and everyone being the same. But we know different don't we. We must be high on something, they say, because what is happening in Christ's church doesn't make a lot of sense. How is it we hear, each of us, in our own native tongues? It is because, long ago, God gave us as Christ's church a gift? And the gift of the Holy Spirit and that same Spirit has been blowing in churches ever since.

And make no mistake about it, the language of the church is as foreign to American consumerism and rugged individualism as Arabic or Russian. It has its own history, its own culture, its own regional dialects and idiosyncrasies. Like all languages, the language of the church takes cannot be learned in an hour on Christmas and an hour on Easter any more than you can learn Greek by watching *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, or you can expect to be fluent in Chinese because you ate dinner at Li's Brothers last night. Christianity takes time to learn, and like all foreign languages, is best learned by emersion. As Christians we are a people who have taken on a common language--God's language, and sought to make it our own. We are a people who speak of grace and forgiveness, a people who talk about resurrection and new life, about reconciliation and starting over, about gifts and spirit and possibility, about promise and covenant and about love, about healing, and hope, and home. But in order to learn it we must listen to our scriptures, we must believe that God is still speaking, and we must not only strive to understand but seek to embody the story of God's relationship with humanity. And if we do then we cannot help but be a people of hope, believing not only that God is not through with us yet, but that our best days are still yet before us.

In Peter's sermon on Pentecost, he makes reference to the prophesies of our sons and our daughters, the visions and dreams of young and old. And like Christians have been doing ever since, Peter looks back to see the future of the church. In the story of Pentecost all the people were speaking about God's deeds of power. They were speaking about it in their own languages, but they were all speaking about the same thing. They were speaking about God's activity in their lives. For the last 8 months our confirmation class has been getting together. But we have just begun to learn the language of the church. We have barely skimmed the

surface of the depths of scripture and prayer, the meaning of our theology and our history and polity. We've just begun to know the power of constructing a life committed to mission and service and justice. And while you are not yet fluent in the language of God, you know enough to be able to speak about God's deeds of power in your own life.

Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians that there are a variety of gifts but the same spirit, a variety of activities but the same God who activates them in everyone. To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. I don't know that any of you who are being confirmed today are entertaining thoughts of becoming ministers some day, but I have seen your gifts, I have heard your stories, I have watched you grow in understanding, and I know that the church needs your voices, needs your visions, and needs your dreams. We may speak of God's deeds with a slightly different accent, or perhaps use words that seem foreign to one another, but in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit we have a wise teacher, a patient tutor, and a skillful translator to help us understand one another.

God has made each and everyone of us a minister, that's what joining a church means, being a part of Christ's ministry in the world. God has given each of us a gift of the Spirit for the common good. Not for our own benefit, but for the common good. God has offered us the stories of the saints and experiences of our lives that we might testify to God's mighty deeds of power. The body of Christ is made stronger today, by the joining of these young people. Christ's church is made stronger by the many voices, the many accents, the many experiences and many gifts which have been bestowed upon us. Today we give thanks for the birth of the church, for the God's gift of the Holy Spirit, and for the gifts of spirit which are made manifest. May we learn to love the language of the church so much that becomes our native tongue, and may we rely on the Holy Spirit to help us understand one another. Amen.