



## “Watching Your Language – A Pentecostal Practice”

At Pentecost we tell the story of the Holy Spirit falling upon the disciples as they wait for guidance about their future. After Jesus' death he mysteriously appeared telling them to wait until they received power to continue the mission that he began. Power is what they received on the day of Pentecost – the power of the Holy Spirit to communicate the story of God's great acts to the whole world.

Let's be clear that the Holy Spirit didn't suddenly appear upon the earth at Pentecost. It wasn't as though the earth was completely devoid of Spirit until it was poured out upon the disciples in Jerusalem. Obviously Spirit was present in the amazing, evolutionary force of the universe. It was also present in the various cultures and religions of the day. When the church talks about the Holy Spirit, we're talking about the source of our power to *communicate* the Spirit of Christ to the world, to speak a new language of good news to a world accustomed to bad news.

Language is such a powerful tool. All animals possess the capacity to communicate – whales use sonar, bats use radar, herons screech, frogs croak – all creation declares the glory of God is the way the Psalmist put it (Psalm 19). But humans have evolved to the point of being able to *symbolize* their experience with vocal gestures. We've entered into cultural agreements that *this* sound stands for *that*

reality. We agree to call that large grey thing that spreads out at the top like the waters nearing the great sea and that grows green skin when the sun warms the land, a *tree*. You can see that this word symbol – tree – is a very efficient way to communicate. Those who are unable to speak have developed a method of communicating that uses hand signals rather than verbal signals – also very efficient. Language is a shorthand, symbolic representation, of the world we share.

But language does more than simply reflect reality in the world out there. It also reflects our *inner* reality and shapes what we call “reality”. As the saying goes: “We do not see the world as *it* is – rather we see the world as *we* are”. The images and metaphors we put into language describe our unconscious assumptions about the way things are. These assumptions are built into our language. Change the language and our whole way of seeing the world changes. For example, my granddaughter Nora asked her mother why God made words. Her actual question was, “Why did *He* make words?” Somehow, at the tender age of four, without any church background, Nora used a male pronoun to describe God. A patriarchal worldview had already lodged itself into her young psyche. Her mother will go to work, to help Nora expand her language about God, and if she is successful, it will change how Nora experiences the world from the

inside-out. Language doesn't just reflect the world as it is – it creates the world.

Pentecost is a story about language – its power to both create and reflect our worldviews – for good and for ill. In today's reading we are presented with two languages – one profane and the other sacred. One is the language of Empire and the other is the language of gospel.

Take the story of the tower of Babel from Genesis. It's a story that ancients told to help them understand why there are different languages. "The whole earth", the writer tells us, "had one language and the same words" (Genesis 11:1). What did they do with these words? They begin to talk to each other about the dream in their hearts. "Then they *said* to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly'. Bricks, the new technology of the day! Then they *said*, 'Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.'" The writer recognizes this as profane discourse.

From the time we're children we're taught to "watch our language". It's a good lesson. But swear words do not exhaust the vocabulary of profanity. Too often we think that being a Christian is mostly about not swearing. When my tennis buddies hear an occasional expletive come out of my mouth when I miss a backhand shot, they're sure they've caught me being "unchristian". They're delighted, in fact! But this is a trivialization of both the Christian faith and profanity. Truly profane language conveys spiritual arrogance – the desire to be rise above all others and assume a god-like status in the world. Rock star, Tom Petty, has a line in one of his songs that goes: "I've got a room at the top of the world tonight,

and I ain't comin' down." That's the language we use to try and build the tower of Babel with – the language of Empire. First of all, figure out how to get the room at the top of the world, and then make the rules in such a way that you never, ever have to come down.

The writer of Genesis ingeniously concludes that the easiest way to disrupt this kind of project is to introduce different languages. If you can't talk to each other, you won't know where to put the next brick in the tower. This is God's second attempt in the book of Genesis to deal with human hubris. First God sends a flood to wipe the slate clean and start again. When that didn't work, God confounds the Babel project to get to the top of world by introducing new languages.

It's a temporary diversion. Humans simply divide up into their own nations, and use their native tongue to execute the Babel project – to make a name for themselves and get to the top. The rise of the great city-states is prefigured here. Eventually, these would evolve into world Empires and the era of domination through force. Empires would fall, but give rise to economic imperialism – the age we're living in. What has not been lost in all this time is the desire to become like gods, to develop new technologies that far transcend bricks and mortars, and to dominate over others – to make a name for ourselves by conquering, by accumulating more wealth, by building the psychological and cultural towers that separate us from the masses below.

But for those with eyes to see, a survey from the room at the top reveals that our yearning for greatness has left in its

wake a mass of suffering, a depleted earth, and chronically dissatisfied souls.

As novelist Arundhati Roy writes: “It’s as though the people have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks – a huge big one and a tiny little one – that have set off in resolutely different directions. The tiny convoy it’s on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness.”

There’s new research indicating that infants, from the age of four months, are able to distinguish between different languages – and not by hearing. They are shown a face speaking in English with the sound muted. When the infants start to show signs of boredom, the person shifts into a different language, again without sound. The babies are tuning into only the visual clues – watching only the muscles in the lips change with the new language. When they tune into the new language the babies perk up, coo, and become fascinated again. The conclusion of the researchers? We are hardwired from birth with an exquisite capacity to learn more than one language.

Pentecost is about being introduced to a new, sacred language – the language of the Spirit. It’s about the deconstruction of the language of Empire through the introduction of a new language – the gospel of Jesus Christ. Bored by the profane language of domination we become fascinated by a new language of affiliation.

In Luke and Acts, the Babel project is reversed. New languages are once again introduced, but not to confuse and confound. Instead they unify and empower

a new movement. The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples to enable them to proclaim the mighty acts of God in the native tongue of all the pilgrims visiting Jerusalem. Here are some words and phrases that constitute the vocabulary of the gospel of grace:

*Forgiveness* – it doesn’t matter if you are Parthian or Mesopotamian, a Tamil or a Hindi, when you hear the words, “forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us”, you look twice at the weapon in your hand and the hate in your heart.

*Mercy* – it doesn’t matter if you are a Median or an Elamite, – French or Algerian – when you hear the words “be merciful as God is merciful”, it makes you think twice about how to treat your enemies.

*Love* – it doesn’t matter if you are Judean or Cappadocian, or Palestinian or Jewish – when you hear the words “you are loved unconditionally” it causes you to wonder about walls that divide and bombs that destroy.

*Peace* – it doesn’t matter if you are from Asia or Pontus, or Syria or Lebanon, when you hear a story about a man transforming the violence of the world into his own suffering, rather than transforming his own suffering into more violence, your story of righteous violence is called into question.

*Blessed are the meek* – it doesn’t matter if you’re a Phrygian or a Pamphilian, or an American or a Saudi, when you hear this phrase, you understand that plans to build your towers high above all other nations and the earth itself are profane.

*The Spirit is poured out upon all flesh* – it doesn't matter if you're Egyptian or Libyan, or Canadian or First Nations – when you hear Joel's prophecy that the Spirit is found equally in all flesh, you begin to question what gives us the right to sentence some to poverty and others to privilege, if everyone is graced by Spirit.

*Jesus of Nazareth* – the name that symbolizes and embodies a new way of being human. When stripped of the dogma and ideology that too often gets attached to him, his name is synonymous with a new way of being. The purpose of life as defined in the language of Empire is to become lord over others. The purpose of life as defined by Jesus is to become servant of all.

To proclaim his name and to wait upon his Spirit is to join a movement – a *movement*, mind you. “Church” may be too static a word to describe what the Spirit unleashes. “Church” may be too associated with buildings and programs and status quo to be included in the vocabulary of Pentecost. For many, church is associated with the triumphal impulse – the Babel project to reach the heavens with its towering spires while ignoring the suffering of the earth.

No, we're part of a movement of Spirit. And only one part, mind you. If Joel's prophecy is correct that the Spirit is poured out upon *all flesh*, we need to realize that the language of grace is spoken in its own tongue by millions of other groups. Paul Hawken, author of *Blessed Unrest*, estimates that there are at least two million groups working for justice and peace and the environment around the globe. The media essentially ignores this loosely affiliated

grassroots movement – but it is a sacred movement. Hawken compares it to single organism that has emerged in order to heal the planet of this dominating, ascendant value system to get to the top of the tower – damn the cost. It has its own language of grace – not religious – but equally sacred and subversive. Words like *dignity, mutuality, cooperation, simplify, respect, reduce, redistribute, share* – it's a dialect we understand. It's only foreign and threatening only to those who are intent on riding the convoy that's headed up to the glittering palace.

So, send once again, O Holy Spirit, those ancient tongues of fire upon this gathering. Help us to be a transformative movement, not a static institution. And just as that first Great Fire, the Big Bang, brought forth a new creation, so may our tongues be furnaces forging a second creation, a new heaven and a new earth, speaking the language of gospel love.