

Crossing Cultures

Acts 2:1-21

75 years ago earlier this week, the D-Day invasion occurred, as Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy in France, creating a base for further actions against the Nazi military. The landing and its aftermath are depicted best on film in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. In the movie, a small group of soldiers are tasked with finding Private James Ryan, whose brothers have all been killed in other battles. One of the team's greatest needs is for a translator, since they'll be traveling through France and dealing with German soldiers. They luck out in finding a translator who speaks both French and German, but he's spent the war away from combat. When he's brought on, he tries to bring his typewriter with him, he accidentally grabs a German helmet, and he continues to act like a fish out of water. Although necessary, those traveling with him don't see him as helpful.

Today is Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. We hear of how they are able to speak different languages, communicating across cultures. Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival established in the Old Testament, and people from all over the known world would travel back to Jerusalem for it. These people would come, barely speaking enough Hebrew or Aramaic to make it through the service. Navigating the challenges of a new city and religious traditions in a different language was far from easy, and created confusion.

The Pentecost we hear about in today's reading shows God doing a new thing. Instead of only being able to hear God's words in Hebrew, God speaks through the disciples in the languages of the people. Instead of only the priests speaking for God, we hear the disciples and those with them speaking in a multitude of languages about all that God had done through Jesus in his crucifixion and resurrection.

When we remember Pentecost, we focus on that miracle of speaking in different languages, and how the Holy Spirit used the disciples to talk in the "heart languages" of the people gathered there. That's certainly important, and certainly miraculous. Ask anyone who's ever struggled to learn another language, and it'd be much easier to be able to just have the Holy Spirit descend on you to speak in those different languages.

But Pentecost is important because it reverses the effects of sin we learn about in today's Old Testament lesson, about the Tower of Babel. In Genesis 11 the people of the earth tried to "make a name" for themselves by building a tower that would reach into heaven. In their pride and arrogance, they exalted themselves above God. But God came down and confounded their efforts, dividing their tongues into different languages and scattering them across the earth in the resulting confusion. So they called the place Babel.

God started his work of fixing those effects of sin in the very next chapter, where we first meet Abraham. Instead of Abraham trying to make a name for himself, it was God who would make Abraham's name great. God would bless him and make him famous. We learned about that the second day of VBS this last week, reminded that God keeps his promises. That promise has come true, as well, as we continue to study his life and make his name famous today. In fact, since Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all claim Abraham, his name is famous over almost the whole world!

Pentecost is about God keeping his promises, too. God kept his promise that the whole world would be blessed through Abraham. At the miracle of Pentecost, that promise begins to be kept in a new way, as the message of God will begin to be spread further than it has before. The message of what Jesus did for us will spread to all nations.

Martin Luther writes about Pentecost, "The Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost brought men of all nations into the one body of the one Head, Christ. Christ joins and unites all into one faith through the Gospel, even though the different languages remain, and he tears down the wall (of separation)."

Unfortunately, those walls of separation still remain. Sometimes, they remain even though we speak the same language, but use it in different ways. A business professor tells a story of a time that he was running a construction business. Two architects came with him to look over the construction site. He took them to the masonry foreman, and they begin to look over the wall that had just been begun. The architects begin talking with one another worriedly, and then start making

comments about how the wall is supposed to look like it's supporting everything and is growing organically out of the ground, and that the wall is a "transition from the rich and irregular organic materials of the New England farm field to the turn-of-the-century geometry of the building." The masonry foreman stares at the architects and with a clear note of annoyance, turns to the business owner and asks, "What the heck did they just say?" After some more conversation back and forth where the masonry foreman is assured that he is not supposed to do a sloppier job, but instead make it look more like a stone wall from several hundred years ago, the architects go on their way pleased that their vision has been communicated. The masonry foreman watches the architects leave and asks, "If that's what they wanted, why didn't they just say so?"

Communicating across cultures isn't just limited to different nationalities. Architects and engineers and construction workers all have different cultures that require different ways of communicating. So do bankers and farmers and all sorts of other occupations, using words and expressions that are unintelligible for the uninitiated, using jargon and technical terms. Each generation, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, has their own slang, influenced by peer groups and popular culture. For some of us, dinner and supper are interchangeable terms that refer to the final meal of the day. For others, they are distinct meals at different times. Communicating across cultures of age, occupation, or nationality is difficult.

In a town that's a melting pot like Ames, we see evidence of this every day. American and international college students communicate in different ways. So do students in different disciplines that communicate using different technical jargon or field-specific terminology. Faculty, staff, and administrators don't always seem to speak the same language. Add in those who are uneducated or undereducated, and watching the communication challenges can become amusing, entertaining, interesting, or if you're behind one of these culture clashes at the grocery store, annoying.

But we see the Holy Spirit at work in crossing the walls and divisions and barriers created by sin, and creating connection and relationships instead. Pastor Anthony from Hong Kong was here on Wednesday, and shared about taking volunteers from the US out to eat in Hong Kong. The foods in Hong Kong tend to be a bit

different, so the volunteers are always curious what things are, especially since they've often served family style in unlabeled bowls. Pastor Anthony tells people not to ask what they are, but to just eat and see if they like it. If they persist in asking, he tells them they're vegetables, even when they're not.

The Holy Spirit may not call us to travel across the world, but the Holy Spirit works in us to help us cross the barriers around us. The Holy Spirit sends us into our neighborhoods and workplaces, where we meet people who need to hear of God's love for them.

Jesus gives his Word and Spirit so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). And He sends the Holy Spirit to fill us, comfort us, counsel us, console us, and help us. The Holy Spirit fills us with courage to let God work through us to share his Word and his love. There's nothing more miraculous than that.

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