

“The Reason for Miracles”
Acts 2:1-21
May 20, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

In 1492, in Salamanca, Spain, Antonio de Nebrija presented his latest book to Queen Isabella. Nebrija had just written the first textbook on the grammar of the Spanish language – a grammar of the vernacular, the ordinary language of the people spoken in markets and in the fields, at home and on the streets. At that time, no other European country had a textbook for their common language. No textbook of German grammar. None for French or Dutch or English. There were plenty of textbooks on the classical languages, like Latin and Greek. But, at that time, no one wrote textbooks on how to learn common languages. Everyone assumed that would be a total waste of time.

When Antonio de Nebrija presented his textbook on Spanish to Queen Isabella, the Queen was confused, puzzled. She did not understand what use a grammar of a vernacular language could possibly have. The bishop had to speak up to explain the significance of the book. The bishop said to the queen, “After your Highness has subjected barbarous peoples and nations of varied tongues, with conquest will come the need for them to accept the laws that the conquerer imposes, among them will be our language.”

The bishop’s explanation made sense to the Queen. Her mind was set on conquest. Of course the Spaniards would need to impose their language on the barbarians in her conquered lands. In the preface of Nebrija’s grammar book, he emphasized the connection between colonialism and language. He wrote, “I have found one conclusion to be very true, that language always accompanies empire, both have always commenced, grown and flourished together.” Nebrija understood the power of a unified language. It is a unifying force which strips others of their identity. Language and empire. Colonialism involved imperial control through language, through a common vocabulary, a single tongue.¹

There's a reason why most of the countries of South America and Mexico and Puerto Rico and so many

¹ Koch, Ryan. *Language, Power and Empire*. May 15, 2016

other places speak Spanish. They were part of the empire of Spain and their local languages are long forgotten.

I love Pentecost. And maybe I love it so much is not because it is the one Sunday of the year in which I get to dust off my red stole, and it's not just because it's becoming a tradition here for Sandra Gobble to make red-frosted cupcakes for Pentecost Sunday, but I love the miracle of Pentecost. It seems to me to be the opposite of what Nebrija and Queen Isabella attempted. The miracle of Pentecost is not that all of a sudden everyone could speak the same language. Remember the story of the tower of Babel? In the book of Genesis all the world spoke one language. But then the people, in their pride, attempted to build a tower up to the heavens, and that's when God confused their language so that they could no longer understand each other. Pentecost isn't a reversal of Babel, the Spirit doesn't descend on the disciples and then all the people can speak the same language. All the languages still exist. In a way the miracle of Pentecost is a confirmation or a verification of Christmas. At Christmas we celebrate the Incarnation, that God came to be like us, wrapped up in human form, in a body just like ours. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes and God speaks to us in languages just like ours. Not one language, but many. Not a holy tongue, but common ones like we use every day. God comes to be with us, to speak to us in our everyday language.

I love Pentecost because it is not about uniformity, but it is about unity. It is about maintaining diversity in the midst of being together. I like that image and it speaks to me that the work of Pentecost is far from over. We continually need Pentecost to be happening. Presbyterian preacher and writer Jill Duffield says, "Pentecost is revolutionary, turning upside down and inside out every human-constructed category, divide and barrier to God's constituting one family. Distinct languages remain, but now we can speak to one another and understand. Nothing will separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, nothing will separate us from one another, either.

And yet, here we are in 2018, divided. The income gap grows, schools have re-segregated, most neighborhoods are homogeneous and churches, well, look around your sanctuary this Sunday. What happened to the revolution of Pentecost?"²

Maybe we need more than the miracle of Pentecost, maybe we need to remember the reason for the miracle. The Spirit comes that day at Pentecost and all of a sudden the disciples can speak other languages. Cool, but what's the point? Why should they speak in other languages? What's the reason for that? The miracle of Pentecost is so that all of those gathered that day can hear the good news of Jesus in their own language, so that no one misses out, so that the gospel is preached to all the people gathered there that day. The Holy Spirit came that day and gave the gift of languages to the disciples. The Spirit always comes and gives gifts for a purpose. Miracles happen for a reason.

The miracle of Pentecost happened not just so that all those gathered might hear in their own language. It happened so that all those gathered might hear *the gospel* in their own language. The Spirit come to proclaim the good news about Jesus to the world, using our words, our hands, our feet, our lives as the Spirit's media for transforming the world. In our prayer of confession that we read today we asked forgiveness for not listening for God's word of grace, for not speaking the good news of God's love, and for not living as a people made one in Christ. That's a pretty good summary of why the Spirit came on Pentecost—that we might listen for grace, that we might speak in love, that we might live as one people. What would that mean for us today? In what ways are we still stuck in our upper rooms? How are we proclaiming the good news? The Holy Spirit has gifted this group of disciples in numerous ways—resources, leadership, compassion, abilities, a beautiful building in a wonderful village. But these miracles, these gifts are given to us for a purpose, for a reason—to share the good news of Jesus. To tell the good news of Jesus—that God loves us no matter what, that we are forgiven through the grace of Jesus and the power of the cross, that we are empowered to change, both ourselves and the world—this is the good news that is ours to share. And if we are not sharing it, if we are stuck

2 Duffield, Jill. *Presbyterian Outlook*. May 14, 2018

in the upper room of our own security and comfort, then we are not the church.

The miracle of Pentecost created a church, a people who had nothing in common with one another except that they were made one family by the power of Christ. It was pointed out to me recently that the Old Testament is the source for Jesus' command to love your neighbors, which it says in Leviticus. But that command only occurs there, only that one time. But more than forty times the Old Testament says to love the stranger, to love the alien who lives among you, to love the foreigner who comes to your land. That seems to me to be part of the purpose of the Pentecost miracle. They can love each other by communicating with the strangers in Jerusalem that week. Whatever strangers God brings to us, we are commanded to care for, to act justly on behalf of, to love. The good news of the gospel that we proclaim anew at Pentecost is the news that God's love is for all and that God's kingdom is here and now. The ongoing miracle of Pentecost is not just that we are brought together like Ezekiel's dry bones, or that we can hear each other, but that we understand each other. We take time to listen to those we disagree with, we don't discard the other or the stranger, we value even the people who make us crazy, or who most days we wish would go away. The new body, the new community that God creates through his Spirit is one where we listen to each other, where each person is welcomed, safe and valued, where personal attacks just hurt us all.

Keri Day from Princeton Seminary writes:

These events of Pentecost invite us to ponder this question: Will we be vulnerable and willing to experience holy disorientation—as the disciples did during ancient days, . . .—in order to announce a new humanity? Will we allow our voices to speak a language of good news that can be heard by all people, especially those who are as vulnerable as the Jews of the diaspora were under the Roman imperial order and as countless people are under American empire today? Will we be open to this joy of Pentecost, the impossible gift of community now made possible through the work of the Spirit?³

3 Day, Keri L. *We Need a Pentecost*. The Christian Century. May 3, 2018

The miracle of Pentecost is not the undoing of Babel. We all still speak different languages, have different experiences, hold wildly different ideas and viewpoints. The miracle of Pentecost is that it doesn't matter. We are made one family in Christ. Now the Spirit gives us the power to live like one family.