

Living Languages
John 14:15-17; Acts 2:1-21
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As of 2005, 7,299 living languages had been identified around the world. They are listed in a publication called the *Ethnologue*. In the first edition mimeographed on 10 pages in 1951, 46 languages or groups were identified. Of the current total, 497 languages are identified as endangered because fewer than 50 people speak the language. Approximately 5% (347) of the world's languages are spoken by 94% of the population. The remaining 95% of the languages are spoken by only 6% of the world's population. The country with the greatest number of living languages (820) is Papua New Guinea. The second highest is Indonesia with 742. The languages of the world range from Aari spoken in Ethiopia to Zyphe spoken in Myanmar.¹

On the day of Pentecost fifty days after the Jewish Passover, hundreds of Jews were gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration. Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival marking the first harvest of the growing season. In Acts Luke notes that they have come from sixteen different geographical regions. Several hundred years before their ancestors had been exiled from Israel and scattered to other lands. Even when it became possible for them to return home, many exiled Jews remained in those distant countries. They are the lands that we know today as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Africa, Egypt, Libya, Italy, Cyprus, and Saudi Arabia. There they continued the traditions of Judaism, but they gradually lost the ability to speak the language of the Temple. Thus when they return to their motherland, they are not able to understand the language native to Jerusalem. Desiring that the good news be heard by all, God sends the Holy Spirit to give the disciples the ability to speak in the languages of the people. The pilgrims hear the good news of God's love spoken in their native tongues. They hear it in living languages that move and inspire them to claim that love for themselves. Over three thousand are baptized into the Christian faith that day.

How important it is for people to hear and understand the works of God in a language they can understand. Can you imagine what condition the Christian church would be in today if Martin Luther had never dared to translate the Bible into the vernacular so that the people could read, study, contemplate, and claim the Word of God in their lives? We might venture to guess that the church would be far smaller. If faith is not accessible to the people, it will cease to exist.

This may be one of the keys to the declining membership of the mainline Christian church. Perhaps we have ceased to communicate in the living languages of the people, a language that is fresh, relevant, and moving; a language inspired by the Spirit of the Living God. In addition to the 7,299 languages of the world, we have multiple means of communicating with one another: the printed text, the visual arts, electronic media, music, body movement, and more. The Pentecost experience described in Acts was really a multi-sensory experience in the likes of Stephen Spielberg or George Lucas. There is sound, like the rush of a mighty wind. There are special visual effects, divided tongues, looking like flames of fire, which touch each of the followers. There is a physical sensation of being filled with passion and enthusiasm. All the senses of sight, sound, touch, and feeling are used to communicate the powerful experience of God's great love.

It all must have made for a rather chaotic experience. Some accused the disciples of being drunk; their new wine caused great commotion among the people. The Holy Spirit is like the wind, blowing where it wills. It cannot be contained in neat, orderly structures that we humans tend to prefer. The Holy Spirit is an unsettling force, moving in unexpected and even unwanted ways. The Spirit of God forces the disciples from the safe place in which they are hiding out into the community. Suddenly there is not just one language but a linguistic extravaganza. There is no single uniform expression of the Gospel; there are multiple languages making the story understandable to many. But such diversity can be confusing as well. The work of the Spirit pushes us out of the familiar into that which is unknown. It calls us to trust and honor the various ways in which God is at work speaking to the people. Here at its birth, the church is not given one uniform mode of expression. The church is born because the disciples speak in the differing languages of all the people.

In order for the Christian faith to continue to be a vital force in the world, it must be communicated in living languages that are heard and understood by people today. Just as literature has many genres, so faith has multiple expressions. As music is played and sung in a variety of styles, faith can be conveyed in an array of ways.

In the established church we can become so accustomed to the way things are and the way things always have been that we fail to recognize the fresh winds of the Holy Spirit blowing among us, opening the doors to new possibilities. Especially in American culture, we are so entrenched in chronic individualism that, like the disciples, we lock ourselves in the safety of a closed room, sealed off from outside influences.

The novelist Jeanette Winterson wrote, “When I let myself be affected by a book, I let myself into new customs and new desires; the book does not reproduce me; it redefines me; pushes at my boundaries, shatters the palings that guard my heart. Strong texts work along the borders of our minds to alter what already exists.”²

That’s what the Holy Spirit does for us if we allow it to work among and in us: it redefines us. It blows down the fences that confine us, planting new insights to broaden our horizons. With fresh winds, the Spirit of God continually redefines the church so that we do not become an endangered species speaking in extinct languages. It is unsettling to allow the cleansing, chaotic winds of the Spirit blow through, intruding into our order and changing the landscape of our souls. But it is far more meaningful to worship a God who is living, dynamic, and active in the ever changing seasons of life than it would be to worship a disconnected, indifferent idol who cares nothing for us. The God revealed to us in Jesus Christ deeply cares about us. That’s why the Holy Spirit is still breathing and moving among us: to redefine us into the people of God for this age and context.

May we open ourselves to hearing and sharing the good news of God’s love in living languages of the people God longs to reach. May the Spirit of God blow among us redefining us in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

¹ www.ethnologue.com.

² Quoted by The Right Revered Alan Jones, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, April 30, 2007, www.gracecathedral.org.

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