

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Acts 2:5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

On this special day of Pentecost, I need to ask you if you have ever had **this** experience: Have you ever been with some people, and you could not speak their language, and they could not speak yours? It is different, because I think we take it for granted that we can just walk out and start talking to someone. I had this for the first time at Niagara Falls as a kid. I encountered French-speaking Quebecers and tried to say hello, without any luck! But then as a 20-year old, on the DAY I turned 20, we flew to Athens, Greece, and we were there for about 6 days. I know NT Greek now pretty well, but I didn’t back then. Well, here we were, wandering around Athens, going to museums, and going to see the Parthenon and all these great things. But the thing that was so hard was not being able to read any signs, and absolutely not being able to understand anyone. We learned a few Greek words. But that would only get you so far. And I experienced a sense of loss for a while because I would look at people, they would look at me, and I would think to myself *“I sure wish I could talk to them, and find out about their life, and tell them about my home area, and just learn about each other.”* How horrible to look into someone’s eyes and think ‘I WISH SO MUCH THAT I COULD TALK TO YOU, TO COMMUNICATE, BUT I CAN’T!’ It is an unsettling situation. Believe it or not, as much as other people might get on your nerves, not being able to talk to other people is pretty rough! In Greece I couldn’t speak to anyone, and that was hard to deal with.

Well, that changed a bit in Italy and then very much in Germany. Italian is still a different language. They say “si” for yes just like in Spanish, and they say “Grazi” for thanks, which is kind of like Gracias in Spanish. They actually say “Prego” for please, just like the spaghetti sauce! Well, one day there turned out

to be extra special for me. I was on a train coming back from Pompeii, the city buried by a volcano in southern Italy. It was a 4-hour train ride to get back to Rome, where we were staying. On the European trains (which I wish we had) you sit in a car that holds 6 people. And, you end up sitting with people you've never met, and will never see again in your life! But on the way back from Pompei, I sat with 5 Italian men, and we had quite a time.

After an hour or so, an older man leaned over to me and spoke a little English. I started talking with him. The next thing you know, the other younger Italian men started asking him questions to translate and ask me. The main thing they wanted to know was why I didn't speak Italian. I told them we didn't have it in our schools. They said OK. Then they said "Do you want to learn?" I said "Yes" and we were off, for the next three hours.

For the next three hours they taught me how to say many things, and I tried them out. They taught me how to count, and to know some numbers, and that was great. Later I'd go buy a piece of pizza, and I'd ask "Quanta costa?" and they'd say "Novacento lira" and I'd buy it and say Grazi, and they'd say "Prego" and I'd eat my pizza! So now I could buy lunch, and that was nice. But then, on the day I left Italy for Germany, the greatest thing happened.

Again, sitting in a train car with people I'd never known and would never see again, we were riding along. Sitting across from me was an elderly Italian couple. For 15 minutes we would smile and look back and forth. Finally I thought "The heck with this, I'm going for it." So I leaned over to this older Italian woman and said "Il mio nome e Ricardo... ho o venti anni... ho sono dal America... ho o uno fratello..." Her face lit up, and she hopped up, turned around, grabbed her big basket, opened it, took out bread and meat and cheese, made me a sandwich, and grabbed a bottle of Chianti wine, popped the cork, and poured me a glass of wine. SHE MADE ME LUNCH ON THE SPOT. And then to make things even sweeter, her elderly husband leaned over with a smile and said "I speak leetle beet English." And I thought to myself "Lord God, life is so sweet... forgive us when we don't love it enough!"

That was a great day in my life. The free lunch had nothing to do with it. Just being able to speak, to communicate, that was the greatest thing of all.

That's what was needed. Later on, I had many conversations in German, and it was a relief to be able to do that.

Now, what does any of this have to do with Pentecost? Well, 2 things. 1) Back in the Book of Genesis, God punishes the humans in Genesis 11 by scrambling their language, at the Tower of Babel. Humans are divided when they cannot communicate. They need to be able to communicate. 2). So what does God do on the first Pentecost? At least for a moment, *the curse of the Tower of Babel was gone*. The disciples spoke other languages, ones that they didn't know, and they were able to understand and to be understood. What a great thing. The curse of Babel was going to be weakened. So, on the day of Pentecost, when lots of people from far away places were in Jerusalem, the remaining disciples were able to tell them about how God had sent Jesus and then raised him from death, in order to reach out to all the world. And it had a big affect: it says that thousands of people became believers that very day. So on that day, people were able to get the news, regardless of their own language. God was able to do that on that special day. And we are still talking about it today.

So should the miracle of Pentecost have any meaning for us today, in our time? I must confess that I am seeing it in a new way, in our times. One year ago I think this was already beginning to happen, but today it is markedly worse. What is our problem today? Is it that we cannot speak foreign languages? No. I think our problem is that we choose not to communicate with others, with whom we share a common language! We don't have a language barrier: we have a communication barrier. Today we text, we do social media, we put little things on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter. People don't really have good conversations. They just sort of chirp...or tweet! People say brief little bits when much more is needed to really understand each other. But it almost seems like understanding each other doesn't really matter to some people. Take your shot, say something quickly, make your attack and turn and run.

I tried to talk about this on Holy Thursday, April 1, although not many were on Zoom that night. On that night before Good Friday, the Gospel lesson is always John 13, where Jesus commands us to love each other, and to really do it. I asked the question that night that I will repeat now: how many of us have

friends or family that we no longer can communicate with? How many people who were once our friends no longer seem to be our friends, or our family? I am happy to say that I don't have many in that boat, but there are a few. And the really sad thing is, we all speak English! Nothing is stopping us, like foreign language difficulties. It almost seems like some folks really just want to fight, and to have something to be mad about. That seems like a hard way to live. I don't see how we would choose that path.

I intend to say more about this in 2 weeks when we look at Matthew 18, and we deal with a thing called "The Rule of Christ." This is something that we have been doing in the UMC in order to have our churches and our people be healthy and to help them deal with concerns and even conflict. People are going to disagree on things. That is always going to be the case. But what should we do when this happens? Surely the answer is not to chirp and run, or tweet and run! Wouldn't it be a great thing if we could take time to actually talk with people again, face to face? I realize that Covid really hurt us all in that regard. We couldn't be together. So how could we talk? I don't know. But in the spirit of the Pentecost miracle, that connected *disconnected* people, I hope that we can learn to talk together again. Texts and tweets and all that will not get it done. In fact things like Facebook should be saved for baby pictures and puppies. It is not designed for serious discussions about serious things. But we need to talk about serious things in life. So my prayer is that a great Pentecost miracle can happen again, this time between people who can already understand each other's words just fine, but just don't take the time to have the conversations they need. If you would like to look ahead, please pre-read Matthew chapter 18. We will be using it to heal our own misunderstandings and concerns in 2 weeks. Happy Pentecost. AMEN.