

## Spirit of Dialogue, Power of Change

(Genesis 11: 1-9; Acts 2: 1-8, 12-13; Psalm 104, selected; **John 20: 19-22**)

I heard this story just a while ago. It was told by a judge in North Carolina, who witnessed the thing; it was retold and possibly embellished when circulated on the Internet.

This happened in a crowded hospital emergency room. A Vietnamese woman was waiting her turn to be examined when she became aware of a frustrating “non-conversation” taking place just two seats down the row. The triage nurse was trying to ask a newly arrived patient for some details about her pain and illness. The patient spoke only Spanish. The nurse did not. Normally there’s a *translator* somewhere in the hospital for situations just like this, but on this particular night there was none to be found. No one else in the waiting room at that time spoke both English and Spanish; none of the other ER staff had time to help. The Vietnamese woman listened intently for a minute, then realized that even though she didn’t *speak* any Spanish, she did understand quite well the bits and pieces of “broken-English” and “fractured-Spanish” that the patient was mumbling between moans. That was because of her *own* experience back in Vietnam during the war when, on many occasions, her life and the lives of her children had depended on being able to understand, and also to make herself understood by, the tiniest little bits of broken English. The Vietnamese woman was able to understand, fairly quickly, the specific pain and fear that the Spanish patient was mumbling and moaning, and in fact, the Vietnamese woman was so successful in bridging the brokenness of those languages and the *disconnected* communication that the hospital eventually brought her on staff as a special translator for situations just like this one—situations that happen all too frequently in hospital emergency rooms.

The fact is that “brokenness” often is the only common language spoken between people—between hospital patients, between cellmates in the overnight lock-up, between passengers on the subway, between parents and teenagers, between students and teachers. There was once a dream, perhaps a hundred years ago, that a new manufactured language called “Esperanto” would become the universal language for the planet, largely because it built on “Pidgin English” which already had a pretty good foothold, but that dream was unable to communicate itself and it vanished. In reality, “brokenness”—broken bits of fractured phrases with minimal intelligibility—brokenness is our common experience and our universal tongue.

Now, I want to apply this idea to the Pentecost story, but in a rather different fashion than you might expect. I have often pointed out that there are two distinct versions of the Pentecost story in New Testament—there’s the more familiar version that we heard in the Acts of the Apostles, and the *less* familiar one we heard in our brief text from John Gospel. Luke tells the more familiar one. It happened in Jerusalem, downtown, on a festival day. The place was packed like Toronto on a Carribana weekend. There was noise and fireworks, like Victoria Day and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July combined, whirlwinds and bull-horns, speeches and demonstrations that really fired up the crowd.

John tells the *other* version of the story, and differences could not be more glaring. Here it’s just Jesus and his disciples, a few days after Easter, in that upper room where the disciples are still hiding

behind locked doors. Jesus quietly greets his friends, identifies himself beyond a doubt, gives them their marching orders, then he simply *breathes out* as *they breathe in*. That, says John, is Pentecost. The disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, and everything is different ever after.

Well, it's easy—too easy, in fact—to talk about the *differences* between these two versions of the Pentecost story. Wouldn't it be more challenging to discover and discuss the *similarities*? What's going on in *both* stories? What's the *same* at the heart of each? What's the movement of the Holy Spirit accomplishing in both versions?

Both versions of the story have this at the core—that the gift Jesus had *promised* is *now* being given. The Holy Spirit is moving through *him* into them, and through them *outward* in an ever-widening circle. It's the start of something utterly new, rather like when the Spirit moved way back in Genesis Chapter One. Both stories are about the gift of Holy Spirit, but beyond that rather obvious connection, what's going on deeper down—in *the people*, in the dynamics *between* people?

This is where that story about that Vietnamese woman in the emergency waiting room comes into play. The language that's being spoken and heard at the beginning of each story *is* that *broken* language. In the Jerusalem setting on the festival day, this is exactly what Luke emphasizes—every known language of the inhabited world is being spoken, *all at once*, and the tiny bits and phrases that you might actually be able to identify are all broken off from each other, all competing for attention. It's like riding on a Toronto streetcar, where the unintelligible noise is symptomatic of a much deeper and wider kind of brokenness.

In John's version of the story, there is also brokenness, but here the *symptoms* are completely different. Here it's utterly *quiet*. Among this handful *in hiding*, they don't *want* to speak. Each one is choking on his own guilt regarding how things played out a few nights earlier in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then later at the trial and finally on Golgotha Hill. Each one has had his own biggest hopes for the new Messiah broken into a million pieces. They have had their hearts broken not just by his death but by the overpowering brutality of it. These disciples of a broken movement have nothing to say, nothing that could make any difference.

When Jesus enters *that* scene and blesses them with his peace, note that the first thing to be addressed and dealt with is communication and dialogue. Jesus speaks into their silence what they need most to hear. He delivers their marching orders from this moment forward, when he says, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." Think about that one for a minute. *How* did the Father send Jesus? Well, he sent him *in person*, didn't he? And he sent him to *teach*, to *talk* and to get *others* talking, to really *open up* some new dialogue between God and people. So, what this gift of the Holy Spirit embodies is the power to *communicate*, to open up new dialogue, and whether that happens one-on-one in a closed room among speakers of the same language, or among thousands in the open air from across the world, makes no difference. It's all about communication, about the kind of dialogue that really opens up new possibilities.

What's the *same* in both versions of the Pentecost story? The Holy Spirit speaks through broken *people* to a broken *world*, using language every broken *heart* can hear and understand. Because Christ and his followers know what it's like to be broken by *hatred*, we can speak intelligibly of the healing *love* of Christ's sacrifice. Because we know what it is like to be broken by *despair*, we can speak of the healing *hope* of Christ's forgiveness. Because we know what it's like to be broken by doubt and by our own indecisiveness, we can speak of unshakable *faith* in Christ's promises. Because we know what it's like to be broken by illness, we can speak of the healing *wholeness* of Christ's resurrection.

The miracle of Pentecost—and this can be seen in *both* versions of the story—is in the way the Holy Spirit speaks to and through our own brokenness, and then gives us the power to do the same thing with *others* who also suffer the bad breaks, the silence and loneliness, the distance, the hopelessness. God's own creative, moving Spirit is in fact the Spirit of dialogue that opens up a new trusting conversation between us and our Lord, and then opens possibilities for the same kind of conversation between everyone who lives on this planet.

Does simple dialogue really have *that* kind of power? A news reporter recently asked this question of a senior diplomat at the United Nations regarding a certain horrible conflict in central Africa, "What is your goal in your current diplomatic efforts?" "To get people to the table to talk," he replied. "Is that *all*?" the reporter challenged. "Well, that's *enough* in 90% of such situations," said the diplomat. "If we can just get people to talk and to *listen*, get them into real dialogue, if we can just get them *started*, the rest can be quite easy after that."

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit got the dialogue started. And whether that's *more* miraculous among speakers of *different* languages or among native speakers of the *same* language, is an open question. With current computer technology, having a dialogue between different languages can be as simple as clicking the toolbar button that says "Translate". Among speakers of the same language, it can be far more difficult. How many parents can actually interpret the *teenager's* dialect? How many Canadians can understand *Newfie*? Speaking of which: Did you hear about the Newfie who just arrived in Toronto and was walking through an upscale neighbourhood looking for work? He knocked on a door and asked the lady if she had any jobs needed done, "Coz Lor' Tunderin' I'm powerful hungry!" he added. The woman sensed a level of sincerity in the fellow and replied that she did have some painting to do on the porch at the back of the house. "In fact," she said, "the paint and brushes were already there for a tradesman who was to come the following day, but if he wanted the job he could go ahead." Well, the Newfie went to work with gusto, and about an hour later he was rapping at the door again to tell the lady he was finished. "Are you *sure* you're done?" she asked. "Did you paint the whole porch and all the trim too?" "Sure ting," he says, "top to bottom, sides too, done like Granny's britches! But by de by, lady," he added, "dat was no Porch, dat was a *Mercedes*!"

Sometimes the greater communication miracles take place much closer to *home*, among the folks who really *should* be able to understand each other but usually don't, sometimes even among the folks who might share the same church pew. It may take a little extra power in some cases, but the Holy Spirit is up for it, and can use even our worst broken efforts and our most badly twisted phrases to make a beautiful dialogue.

Pentecost is the day to celebrate and really give thanks to God for being so communicative, so lovingly, self-revealingly conversational, for calling us to the table and inviting us to talk, too. It's the day when, with the Holy Spirit's prompting, we just might find the words to praise God as we ought to praise, and to speak to God in words and music more beautiful than we ourselves could ever devise. This is a day of *holy dialogue*, and the words God will speak to us are words far more wonderful, more deeply stirring and utterly life-changing than any words we humans could ever offer, in any language.

This is the day of holy dialogue: we can speak and God can understand; God can speak and we can hear correctly; we can speak to each other and even to people we don't know, and they, by God's own Spirit, can hear and understand what's up and what's at stake. It's a day for *spirited* conversation, which is exactly what being a *follower* of Christ and a *recipient of his gift* is all about.

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