

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 28, 2023

Languages

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many languages do you speak? How many languages have you studied? Unfortunately, most Americans are not exposed to much variety of language. I say unfortunately because studying different languages can really illustrate some of the challenges of communication. And understanding those challenges makes us better communicators. And if we are truly created for community then we are also created to be communicators. Let's face it, community is largely impossible without good communication.

It is no coincidence that the miracle of Pentecost, the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, manifests itself in language, in understanding. God is clearly concerned with the gift of communication. And sure, this is to facilitate the spread of the Gospel. But I believe it is also aimed at fostering a stronger and healthier community of disciples.

When you study a new language you quickly discover how things like the culture in which that language was formed can affect it. So, to study a language means that we are also studying some of that language's culture. This is clearly expressed when you encounter things like idioms and analogies. In this fashion, you can quickly see how studying a language fosters the sort of understanding that is the foundation for connection and community.

Studying other languages also illustrates the trouble we can have with definitions. Different languages can have different levels of specificity within them. English, for example, is not a particularly precise language. An easy example of this is the English word "love." Do you love your spouse, friend, or child the same way in which you love pizza or some other food? I certainly hope not! Other languages have different terms for different sorts of love, avoiding the need for the context clues so often necessary in English.

To know a different language, or even just to study a different language, requires an openness to variety and nuance that is clearly important to God. Such an openness to variety and diversity is one of the best ways to foster understanding between people. It says a lot to me that the Spirit's power is made manifest in a gift that leads to deeper understanding of others, better communication and connection. Everything God does seems to be oriented towards celebrating diversity while also fostering understanding and building community.

This orientation is not just found in our reading today from Acts. We can see that same orientation at work in Christ's actions in John 20. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and then gives them instructions that have a great deal to do with relationship, connection, and community. Since we human beings are prone to selfishness, mercy and forgiveness are just as foundational to community as communication is. Once we see God's communal orientation, we will find most of what Christ teaches is oriented similarly.

So, if the gift of the Holy Spirit has to do with building community, and much of Christ's teachings are also oriented towards that same goal. Then we can conclude that followers of the way of Christ should seek that same orientation. Once again, we find connection and community at the heart of our theology.

This morning we are witnessing some important faith milestones for some members of our community of faith via both baptism and affirmation of baptism. You will notice in both of these rites a strong orientation towards community. The promises involved, like living among God's faithful people, caring for others and the world, and working for justice and peace, have a strong communal orientation. And the other promises, like participating in the Lord's supper, hearing the proclaimed Word, learning scripture, and praying, are all means of equipping ourselves for community-building.

This communal orientation does not seem to always come naturally to us humans. So, we give thanks to God that is not solely on us to do this work. Jesus came to show us an example of this work, and to teach us what we need to know to engage in it. But knowing how stubborn and slow we humans can be, God also sent the Holy Spirit to help us in this work.

I ask again, what languages do you speak? But here's the thing, I don't necessarily mean languages like French or Japanese or Zulu. Rather, what

languages do you speak that show your understanding of the communities you are a part of? Perhaps you speak golf. Or farming. Or birding. Or sailing. Or fishing. Or corporate. Or academia.

If your orientation is towards connection and community-building you will discover that you have already been well equipped to speak a variety of different languages! Now the next step is to use those various languages, but really the understanding of the communities that you have, to connect deeper and to form bridges. Can you foster community between golfers and sailors? Or between farmers and urbanites? Do you have the sort of understanding that might lead to those deeper connections?

The gift of the Spirit means that you are uniquely positioned, by virtue of the understanding you have of the various communities you are a part of, to connect people, to build bigger and more diverse communities. You are uniquely gifted, at your particular nexus of all of the communities you are a part of, to do work only you can do! How amazing is it that God has crafted this tapestry of people that we get to participate in!

The Way of Christ is a way oriented towards fostering communion with God and connection with neighbors. And the Spirit has used your journey of life and faith up until this very moment to prepare you for this Way, this orientation, this calling. The Spirit has gifted you with unique experiences that have deepened your understanding of others in ways that you now get to use to live out that communal, community-building orientation.

In an increasingly divided world, the Way of Christ calls for unity and community. And those are only possible if we're willing to seek understanding, learn and utilize different languages, appreciate the great diversity that God has created, and pursue mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. We have been sent out into the world to be agents of community and understanding. It's not easy work, and we will be opposed, but it our holy calling. Amen.