

WITH ONE VOICE

A sermon for Pentecost by Jo Ann Staebler

Close your eyes and imagine the scene. It's another day of the new normal, the tenth since we watched Jesus disappear from our sight, telling us to wait. We're crowded into an upstairs room. Through the open windows we hear rising from the streets below the babble of many languages, spoken by devout Jews from all corners of the world in this cosmopolitan city. We are quiet, though, wondering what Jesus meant when he said he would send another. When should we expect this 'other'? Did he mean soon? Or years from now? What would this 'other' be like? He used the word for 'legal advocate,' but that doesn't really mean much to us. We've been here for more than a week and it's so hard to keep it all together without him.

Suddenly the wind comes up. But it's not coming through the windows; it seems to be centered inside the room. It's loud and fierce, like the storms on Lake Galilee, or like the breath of God's Spirit at the creation of the world. What is it? Suddenly there's fire, too—flames dancing above each head, but not consuming anything, just like the bush Moses saw. We remember how Jesus was always telling us not to be afraid. Jesus. If he were here he'd know what to do. We breathe deeply and try to remember the calm that always flowed from him when we were fearful.

Two thousand years later it's hard to imagine what an exciting moment that must have been! Wind! Fire! Today many churches have hung red streamers and banners. Maybe they have fans going. There are songs about wind and fire and Spirit. We want to *experience* Pentecost! We want to make it real again. Bring on the shiny things so we can pretend we were there!

There's more here than shiny things, though. In our readings this morning we hear the outpouring of language: tongues praising the Creator in the psalm, the Spirit testifying for us in Romans and teaching us Truth through the gospel. And in the story of Pentecost, the Spirit pours herself out in all the languages of the known earth. It is the disciples' inspired speech that provides the medium for the Spirit to fall on everyone.

Luke uses three words for speech to tell this story—one is not enough! One word mimics the syllables la-la-la and indicates proclamation. Another is the source of our word “dialect,” and the third, from which we get “glossary,” is the one used to describe speaking in tongues, although that’s not what’s going on here.

What is going on is that the heart of the story is the message, the words. To get the message across, language differences are transcended and everyone is included in the story. We have to hedge a bit on “everyone.” Luke is clear that the people in the streets are “devout Jews.” They come from all over, some living in Jerusalem, perhaps to be near the center of their faith, while others might have come for the feast that celebrated the giving of the Law. The mission to the Gentiles comes later. For now, and forever as far as they knew, the message was given for Jews.

How do we pass on the message today? The disciples were gathered in a private upstairs room. They weren’t participating in what was happening in the streets below. Do we do that too? We gather in our beautiful buildings with the back doors locked. We invite people to come join us and do things our way, to become one of us. We continue to speak our own faith language and if we think about it, we might provide a guide to our worship and life together if there’s space in the bulletin.

Look what the Spirit did with privileged language on Pentecost. Luke doesn’t say it directly, but he implies that the disciples—not just the twelve apostles, but the next circle of women and men as well—he implies that they opened their locked door and came down into the street, where the people were. I imagine them bursting out the door and down the stairs and into the streets, unable to restrain themselves. Not only did they join the ‘others,’ they were given the power to speak in their languages, even though most of the people in the streets were probably fluent in Greek as well as their first language. If we were there and it were happening today, we’d be speaking Spanish, and Arabic, and Swahili, and Mandarin, and Navajo, not “English because if you want to be here you need to learn English.”

Speaking another’s language is an amazing gift, as a woman brought to the U.S. from India while an infant found out. Her family spoke Mah-lay-ALL-am, the language of 38 million people in southern India, and they made sure that she

learned to speak it along with English. “I grew up with a divided and defensive sense of identity,” she writes. “We (brown people) were Indian and spoke Malayalam, while they (white people) were American and spoke only English. As immigrants determined to make America our home, we might cross the great divide and master English, too, but the linguistic traffic would never flow in the opposite direction. . . . I had never even met an American who'd heard of my language.” Then when she was nine or ten, her uncle brought a guest to an extended family gathering. This blond, blue-eyed woman greeted them in Malayalam. As the family’s jaws dropped, she proceeded to tell them her story in careful but convincing Malayalam, about how she had spent time in Kerala province and learned how much can’t be said with just one language. The author was never the same again. No longer did the “distances separating ‘us’ from ‘them’” defy crossing. The guest had taken a risk—made herself vulnerable—and entered the world of the other. And they became less ‘other’ even to themselves, no longer able or willing to hang onto their self-protective narratives about identity.

Do we understand what the Spirit did on Pentecost? The world became one. Boundaries of language, culture, and spirituality were knocked down. Through the immense power of language, the world was changed, not by making everyone speak the language of the privileged, but by making the privileged speak the language of the ‘other.’ The gift of welcome was given with no qualifiers as the disciples joined the others where they were. The story of the church through the remainder of the New Testament is one of struggling with boundaries: who’s in, who’s out? At Pentecost, though, there was no ‘out.’ There was only ‘in.’

Being ‘in’ is about more than what language we use. There’s more to the message than the medium. Many voices become one when the message comes through. “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” “The Spirit of truth . . . abides with you, and . . . will be in you.” “. . . led by the Spirit [you] are children of God” and “have received a spirit of adoption.” Sisters and brothers, the message is love. We all belong. We are loved. It matters not what language we speak, or how we worship. What matters is that we are adopted into love. There is only one language, and that language is love.

How do we speak love? Jesus said that if we could not believe (the Greek word means “have faith”) that he is in the Father and the Father in him, then we should look to his works and have faith because of what we have seen. The world out there is full these days of people who can’t find faith on their own and depend on our works to bring it to them. The Pentecost story sends us out beyond these walls to bring love to those we might consider ‘other.’ We are called to join them first, and only later to invite them to join us. Because when you think about it, everything we do within these walls, from worship to meetings to fellowship, is ‘other’ to the people we call other. Rather than expecting them to show up here and speak our language, the Spirit sends us to show up in their lives, speaking their language. When they are ready, when there are no longer any identities that make any of us ‘other,’ the Spirit will send them into our gathering, where there is no ‘other.’

Ultimately, there is only one language at the heart of things. That language is love, spoken into eternity with one voice.