



TOUCH POINT

What is Your Native Language? – Touchpoint for May 19, 2021

Acts 2 (MSG) ¹⁻⁴ *When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.*

⁵⁻¹¹ *There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were blown away. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; Even Cretans and Arabs! "They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!" ¹² Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?" ¹³ Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine."*

¹⁴⁻²¹ *That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen: "In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams. When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit On those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy. I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, Blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood-red, Before the Day of the Lord arrives, the Day tremendous and marvelous; And whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved."*

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

The Pentecost story from the book of Acts is such a story in contrasts.

The disciples, hiding in fear, wanting to be isolated, are thrust out into the world with a big spotlight on them. The peoples of the world, separated by language and culture, are now united in a common story. A common experience. The bubbles they have been living in are shattered, popped, exploded.

And why? Because...

"... we hear, each of us, in our own native language."

What a remarkable statement. *"... we hear, each of us, in our own native language."*

So often in my life I have wanted people to express things in the way I would express them. So often in my life I have wanted people to explain things in the way I would explain them. So often in my life, I have been unwilling to understand another unless they put things through my language, my culture, my history filter.

I have made the description of my faith experience a prescription for others.

I think that is the down side to the phrase, "Help me understand." It forces the other person to explain

things in the way I think, I feel, I live. “Help me understand” demands that the other person enters into my world first, puts things in my perspective, before I can trust them or deal with them. Why can't we trust others without having to understand them first?

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language” ... Is that something we can trust?

This phrase challenges us on how we understand unity. Does it mean uniformity? Does it mean sameness? Does it mean conformity?

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language” ... Is that something we can trust?

So often in my life, I have wanted to correct people when they wouldn't say things the way I would say them. This was especially true when it came to faith statements, people describing their experience of the divine.

I had made the description of my faith experience a prescription for others. They had to say it in Christian terms, and not just Christian terms, but in my denominational terms. It seemed I was more interested in how they described their experience of God than whether or not they had an experience of God.

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language”

What a remarkable statement. God comes to people where they are at. God meets them in their own language, their own culture, their own experience.

Each hears, each encounters, each experiences the love, grace and forgiveness of God without having to change first.

Let me repeat that:

Each hears, each encounters, each experiences the love, grace and forgiveness of God without having to change first.

When you contrast this Pentecost moment, with the Jesus story, the difference in the nouns is breathtaking.

In Jesus you have a singular person. At a singular point in time. In a singular place and culture.

In Pentecost, you have multitudes of people, from multiple cultures and languages, being impacted for multiple generations.

The nouns are all different. But the verbs, the relationships, the story is the same.

God's grace is being poured out. God's cup is overflowing. What Jesus lived out on a singular level, is now happening at a communal level, national level, world level.

The radicalness of Joel's prophecy of the pouring out of God's spirit is coming true. It isn't just on men, but sons and young men, as well as old cantankerous, 'get off my lawn' men (and for that I am forever grateful). And on top of that, it is daughters as well. And if that isn't enough, it is being poured out on slaves, both men and women. In a world where the caste system was seen as ordained by God, this is as

radical as it gets.

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language” ... Is that something we can trust?

The older I get, the more I appreciate this statement. I find myself less concerned with whether people describe their God experience through my language, my terms, my constructs. More and more these days I find listening to others describe their faith journey invigorating and energizing. I find listening to them expands my experience of God and how God works in the world. I hear remarkable stories of how God has expressed grace, mercy and forgiveness in ways that I never could have imagined.

Just as I have tried not to make the description of my faith journey a prescription for others, so have I learned to not make others' description of their faith journey a prescription for me.

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language”

And the more I hear them describe their faith journey in their language, the more I have begun to ask myself how have I experienced God in my language.

You see, when you begin your school years at a private Lutheran school. And then go to a Lutheran college, and then a Lutheran seminary, with a couple of years as a Lutheran missionary thrown into the middle of that... Well, at times, one can limit one's experience of God to a certain expression, culture, or experience.

Perhaps this is one reason the Lutheran church is dying; it can't see beyond its own expression or those similar to it. It doesn't seem to trust those who have heard the gospel in their own language. It doesn't see that there are Martin Luthers springing up throughout Christianity. Rob Bell from the evangelical community is one example. Rachel Held Evans was another. My friend Henry Rojas in the recovery community is a third. These three have put grace as primary and foundational in one's relationship with God. Which is the core of Lutheranism, not, a liturgy or name on a church sign. Or a culture.

Do they always use northern European theological language? No, they actually use 21st Century American language. And why do they do this? So each can hear in their own language.

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language”

This statement is a necessary attack on our denominationalism and tribalism. For it forces us outside of our pathetically tiny tents of tradition and into a world where the Spirit has been unleashed.

It exposes the absolute absurdity of the idea that a domination can be in “Full Communion” with some churches and people, and not others. Look people, like it or not, we are in full communion with the entire world and all creation. We all came from the same God and we will all return to the same God. It is one Spirit that gives life to all.

We share the same DNA with all of creation. We are all in full communion with all of creation because we are all a part of creation. What an affront to the creator and the Spirit to think we can decide who we are in “full communion” with and who we are not. The institutional church will die, and rightfully so, if it can't expand beyond its myopic view of the Spirit and Kingdom of God.

“... we hear, each of us, in our own native language”

I think this statement can not only open us up to the stories of others, and trusting their life experience of God, I think it can open us up to our own history, our own life experiences of God.

What is your life language? What is your native, spiritual tongue? How has God spoken to you? Don't worry about putting it in the language of others. Don't worry about making it acceptable to others. How has God spoken to you through your language, your history? What are those moments of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness? What are those moments of connection with others? When have you felt the love FROM God and neighbor as themselves?

There is a profound statement here that affirms our unique life experiences, life history, life language.

What unites us is not our agreement on everything, a common belief, or expression. Heck, if that were the case, I wouldn't even be united with myself. Because half the time I disagree with myself from one day to the next... No wait, that's not right. It's one minute to the next... Or is it...Oh, never mind.

What unites us is not our agreement on everything, a common belief, or expression. No, what unites us is a common experience. What unites us is a common forgiveness, a common mercy, a common grace.

What unites us is what has been poured out on ALL people, 'the Spirit of God' to quote again from the prophet Joel.

What unites us is what God has done and is doing in our world.

What unites us is not what we do, think, or feel. What unites us is what God has done for us.

If you need a clearer example of that, look no further than this meal. I think it is pretty safe to say that at this meal there was no meeting of the minds. Certainly, no agreement or common belief on who Jesus was and how he should act. I mean, Judas obviously wasn't in agreement. Peter was in denial. And Thomas believed that... Oh who knows what Thomas believed? He doubted everything.

So, what would unite them? What would bring them together? What they couldn't do for themselves would be done for them.

A little bread and a little wine. The forgiveness of sin pronounced over them. The presence of God placed in them.

There...in the story of Judas' betrayal. There... in the story of Peter's denial. There in the fear and doubts of the others. There. There was God's presence and forgiveness. Uniting them.

And here, here in this bread and this wine. God's presence and forgiveness. For me, for you. Connecting us, re-memorizing us, and uniting us who have different histories and use different language to express ourselves. Connecting us...just as we are. Without us having to do anything first.

Here. Here we find our unity. Our home.

Here! Here!

Amen

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Calm Me Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.

Still me Lord, keep me from harm.

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come Drink of Living Water

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(John Rutter, St. Paul's Cathedral Choir)

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you. And give you peace....