

“What Does This Mean?”

Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:11-12).

You don't have to read Genesis 11 to know that differences in language divide people. Language creates an invisible, inescapable hedge of division, and when you hear someone speaking in an unfamiliar language it is an unavoidable sign of separation. One of the most basic elements of human experience, language is something about which laws have been passed and over which wars have been waged, and this universal and fundamental facet of life plays a central role in the Pentecost story from Acts 2.

The word “Pentecost” (which, in Greek, means “fiftieth”) was the name given to the Jewish festival held exactly 50 days after Passover. Pentecost was a harvest celebration known in ancient Judaism as, “the Feast of the Weeks” (Numbers 28:26). It was also one of the high holy days in the Jewish calendar and this meant that to truly mark this occasion there were certain rites that could only be celebrated in the Jerusalem Temple. So, every year, Jewish people from all over the world would stream into Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks, enter the Temple courts, and present their “first fruit” offerings to the priests.

This was a highly ritualized act and, as the harvest offerings were brought in, each farmer would step forward and, in Hebrew, recite a liturgical verse from Deuteronomy that began like this, “I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us” (Deuteronomy 26:3). The recitation would then continue with several more verses which detailed the mighty acts of God, including Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and finally it would conclude with the farmer praying, “Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deuteronomy 26:15).

Taken straight from the Torah, this was the ritual every Jew was bound by the Law to honor, generation after generation, and no matter where on earth they lived, every good Jew came to Jerusalem to celebrate this harvest festival. Yet as time wore on, and as the Jewish people were scattered farther and farther from their homeland, a problem developed; many Jewish people stopped speaking Hebrew. So, in order to deal with these non-Hebrew speaking Jews, the priest would lead them through the ritual one by one. He would recite a sentence in Hebrew and, like we do with confirmation or wedding vows, the person making the offering would repeat what the priest had said, whether he knew what he was saying or not.¹

Well, if you were ever bullied on the playground or singled out because you were different in some way, then you know what happened next. As the Hebrew-speaking Jews watched this public ritual unfold, they began to mock the non-Hebrew-speaking Jews for not knowing the language and, in their spirit of superiority, they turned a sacred, religious rite into a humiliating spectacle. In response to their shame, the ridiculed outsiders simply stopped bringing their offerings. As a result, it was decided that instead of making each individual recite the liturgical verses of offering by himself, the priests would lead all the people whether they knew Hebrew or not. In this way, Hebrew remained the official language of the Temple and the priests could still collect the offerings.

What played out in the Jerusalem Temple 2,000 years ago is what we today would call bigotry – discrimination based on differences that had nothing to do with character or religious belief. And in many ways the church today is no different. We are all natural-born experts at focusing on the things that separate us. Think about the way we live. When was the last time that you shared your life with someone who looks or talks or dresses in a way that is significantly different from you? Or when is the last time you extended a hand of friendship or welcome to someone who is clearly on another social or economic

¹ *The Lutheran Study Bible* (CPH: St. Louis, 2009) 1835.

plane? Whether it's due to language, color, gender, age, or socioeconomic status, we naturally look for ways to separate ourselves from those who we deem "different." In the world, these exclusive attitudes give birth to all kinds of destructive behaviors that weaken the fabric of our country and narrow our vision of the future. These societal issues are bad enough, but when prejudice and division occur in the Church, the stakes are much higher and the damage is much deeper.

Jesus said, "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18). And James wrote, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes...have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?... (If) you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:1-4, 9-10).

That's what God says about bigotry! That's what God says about prejudice! And this Word from God should scare us to death. When we see the standard that God sets and when we examine our own attitudes and actions, the only response we can rightly give is repentance. Repentance is needed in the world today. Repentance is needed in the Church today. Repentance is needed in us today. For all the times we have sought separation even as we confessed Christ, and for all the ways in which our words and actions have promoted prejudice and created division we deserve God's wrath and we need God's forgiveness. And when we repent – when we acknowledge our sinful inclinations and admit our selfish thoughts of superiority – when we confess these sins to God, He promises that forgiveness is exactly what we have.

Jesus died to bring us to God, and to bring us together! And that is exactly what we see in the story of Pentecost. Luke writes, "When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." The languages that were confused at the Tower of Babel were now reunited in the Temple itself and, as Luke tells us, the message they spoke was about the "mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11).

Do not miss this! A lot has been written about what the crowd meant when it said, "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And I guess I always just assumed that they were talking about Jesus and bearing witness to the resurrection of Christ, and I'm sure they were. But there's more to this phrase. Throughout the Old Testament this phrase, "the mighty works of God" was a reference to God's action in the story of Israel – His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, His deliverance from Egypt, and His gift of the promised land; in essence, all of the words that were to be recited – only in Hebrew – during the celebration of the Feast of Weeks. But now these "mighty works of God" were being proclaimed in every language under heaven, and Luke writes, "amazed and perplexed," the people said to one another, "What does this mean?"

My friends, today we know exactly what it means! Pentecost is God's public and permanent proclamation of the new covenant; one not based on ethnic heritage or religious ceremony, but on the blood of the Lamb shed on Calvary for people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). Those are the words John used as he described heaven in the book of Revelation, and as Peter got up to deliver his Pentecost sermon, that's exactly the Word he preached, and that is exactly the Word we proclaim today. In Christ Jesus we are one, and the language of the Spirit is the language of grace. It is the language that declares the mighty works and promises of God to all and for all! And today, in this Gospel language you are saved. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, in the uniting name of Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold