

Feast of Pentecost 2009 Church of the Redeemer Acts 2, Romans 8, John 15 David J. Schlafer

The following are notes from which this sermon was preached extemporaneously.

- 1) I didn't do badly in high school language courses—but was a very bad language student.
 - One reason: Teachers as marine drill sergeants. All we did was “Drill, baby, drill.”
 - More fundamental problem: The way I understood “translation”—
Figure out what those weird word/phrases in another language “really” meant
Master language by tethering it on shortest possible leash to my own mother tongue (*Sit! Stay! Speak!*)
 - Prejudicial provincialism went deeper than I knew—view of language was not just insular but imperial
{Recount story of singing a concert in the Netherlands, hearing the pastor pray in Dutch,
and spontaneously thinking “He can't do that! God won't understand.”}
My unconscious assumption was: “God's language is English, all the others are only imperfect adaptations.”
The experience was probably the most sober encounter with self-awareness I had on the tour.
- 2) The good news of Gospel gets heard by witness/testimony
 - Last week we noted witness/testimony are often associated with how those activities are evident in litigation/lobbying—adversarial—mine better than yours
 - We suggested another metaphor—witness as celebration/sharing (after the splendid concert that Andy and Jessica presented in the church to family and friends a week ago)
 - There is a problem with that metaphor also, however: The more you keep singing/sharing own song, the easier it is to assume (quite unconsciously) it's the best song—the only one worth singing
 - If *witness* and *testimony* are overtly adversarial, we at least have to acknowledge opponent to contend with (E.g.—the lobbying campaigns up and running for and against the new Supreme Court nominee
If we get absorbed in celebrating and sharing, we may become oblivious to what we are missing or squelching
- 3) Pentecost is the story of “translating” God's word into other languages—and there are problems with how we can :
 - Sounds like a supernaturally injected skill set (Berlitz/Rosetta Stone course, painlessly “drilled” into disciples
 - It also can be read as assuming that translation is an efficient mechanism to draw other languages into the “real” one---an unconscious imperialist assumption that God's language is “really” Galilean (or, indeed, that it is only Christian).
- 4) But it is possible to hear this story another way:
 - Key phrase: *began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability*
As with miracle of loaves/fishes, description of the mechanics is missing—HOW
 - {Retell}
 - “Devout Jews” have been coming to Jerusalem for years to celebrate Pentecost, it would be all but impossible not to pick up at least a few words and phrases from overhearing and interacting.
 - When the Spirit descends, each disciple goes to those whose language he is at least minimally familiar.
 - They grope for words—misunderstand each other—each party to the conversation helps the other out.
 - Disciples have to *listen/learn* from others in order to *connect* with others.
A fumbling/stumbling process of *simultaneous translation leading to mutual transformation*
Talking points: not places to hold onto, but from which to jump off and adventure forth
“Something is always lost in translation”—but something is always gained as well.
 - The Holy Spirit is the dancing energy of the interchange. Pentecost is *Spirit-ed Conversation*

- 5) This understanding of the Spirit's outpouring is fully in line with 4th Gospel:
- *Many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now*—You now have only the most rudimentary understanding of the language of God's love. It will take you years to achieve graduate school proficiency.
 - *When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth*—A continuing, unfolding process.
 - *He will not speak on his own, but speak whatever he hears*—The Spirit will not override other voices, but listen to them, and communicate their insights back to you.
- 6) This is, in fact, what happens as the book of ACTS unfolds—
Simultaneous translating leading to mutual transformation
- Peter (now courageous): Not “drunk” (i.e. suspect just because it is unintelligible to *your* ear) Rather, this is a whole new understanding of an old prophecy you already know—the voiceless—the young, women, slaves are given voice
The challenge: not to dismiss those voices, but listen to/engage them in conversation
 - Peter himself is subsequently stretched in a translational encounter with Cornelius (The “unclean” Roman soldier already understands—So Peter has to preach a sermon to himself.
 - Philip is pushed to the limits in his translational encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, who asks for baptism, based on how Philip interprets scripture for him. (“But I’m just an Associate Apostle, and the Rector is out of town!”)
 - The whole church is transformed in the translation of Gospel from Jewish to Greek ears, And decides that, while practices associated with pagan religion need to be avoided by Greek converts, there is no reason to require that those Greeks adopt the whole tradition of Jewish practices.
- 7) Leads to truths deeper still, as St. Paul suggests:
- God & Gospel are beyond the limits of language
 - *Groanings that cannot be articulated*—truth that can only be gestured/stretched toward
 - Not just humans, but whole creation—fish and birds, mountains and rivers have voice.
 - We all have a deep longing for connection—language that builds bridges, not bulwarks, battering rams.
- 8) How much we need such an understanding of language--“activist judges”/“identity politics”
Presupposition that genuine translation/interpretation is not going to happen, which, in turn, creates further conflict that renders translation more difficult still.
- 9) Another alternative:
- Spirit-ed Conversation where *simultaneous translation becomes mutually transforming*.
 - Evidence of that around us already: Trip to Burundi; EFM graduation
 - Possibility of that immediately available:
Sermon dialogue—“What are you still hearing?” “Where might that be leading?”
- 10) The Gospel is not a single note played on a violin;
but music made through many instruments, many songs, and many interpretations.
The Gospel is, in fact strikingly akin to improvisational jazz, where each player must listen to the others, and something entirely new emerges in the music making.
The Spirit descends in tongues of fire, and all hell breaks *down* because all heaven breaks *loose*.
Well, Alleluia for that!
So, let us give voice to that alleluia by lending our own distinctive voices
as, with one voice we confess and celebrate, witness and testify to our common faith
WE BELIEVE IN ONE GOD