

Sermon for Pentecost: “Found in Translations.”

Rev. Stephen Milton

Pentecost, June 5th, 2022

How much does it matter if a language survives or dies? That been one of the questions on some people’s minds in Quebec and Ottawa recently. This week, the Quebec government’s Bill 96 became law, the latest in a long line of laws which aims to preserve the French language in Quebec.¹ The new law is controversial – it mandates that workers need to speak French in most workplaces. In some parts of the province that is already the norm. But in places like Montreal, where there is a large English-speaking minority, the law has been seen as a draconian attempt to limit freedom of speech. The Quebec government says that it needs the law to keep French alive in Quebec.² The federal government has said that it is concerned that the bill violates the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.³

To people who live in Toronto, this may seem like an odd dispute. Afterall, we have a city teeming with languages from all over the world. There are at least 200 hundred languages spoken here⁴. The City of Toronto and the school boards try to provide services in many languages not just one, at least when it comes to services online. In some ways the multiple languages of this city reflects what Canada was like before Europeans arrived. Before the French arrived in the 1500s, Canada was home to hundreds of Indigenous nations, who spoke over 450 languages in the land now known as Canada.⁵ This land has always been multilingual.

But the reality is that there has always been a tension between the desire to have many languages or just a few. Canada started off as a nation of hundreds of languages. When Europeans arrived with their missionaries, there was an effort to convert the Indigenous people. Protestants learned the languages of the Cree, Inuit, Mohawk, and other nations, and translated the Bible into their languages.⁶

That experiment however ended in the 19th century with the residential school’s system. The federal government decided that Indigenous cultures should die out. So, when Indigenous children were sent to school, they were discouraged from speaking their own languages, and taught to read and speak in English. Since these schools were run by churches, the most important book they were expected to read was the Bible, in English, and in Quebec, in French. This policy meant that many tribes slowly lost the ability to pass on their languages, so that

¹ “Quebec’s Bill 96 officially becomes law, French language minister named,” *Global News*, June 1, 2002.

² Philip Authier, “Legault turns up the heat on language as Bill 96 is signed into law,” *Montreal Gazette*, June 1, 2022.

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/bill-96-federal-response-justice-minister-legault-1.6465090>

⁴ <https://elalliance.com/toronto-languages/>

⁵ https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/421/APPA/Briefs/DiscussionPaper_NAFC_e.pdf page 3.

⁶ Gerald Benson, *To the ends of the earth: a history of the Canadian Bible Society*, 23; list of Indigenous translations in 19th century: p.32.

many today consider English their first language, and all but 70 of the original 450 languages have died out.⁷

The irony is that when the church was born, it was expressed in many languages, not one. Today is Pentecost, the day that the apostles were visited by the Holy Spirit.



We are told that the spirit arrived looking like tongues of fire that hovered over their heads. The even greater miracle is what happened next: each of the apostles began to speak in a different language, tongues they had never learned.

In the Pentecost story, the Holy Spirit wants to send the apostles all over the world, to spread the Jesus story, in a dozen languages. But the story they are asked to share is not the New Testament as we know it. The New Testament wouldn't be written for another 40 or 50 years. Instead, each disciple went out to different parts of the world to share the story of the Jesus they knew. And that meant there would be at least 12 different kinds of gospel stories out there, told in local languages. Each disciple had their own memories of what Jesus did and what he said, so the stories would be different.

A few decades later, the New Testament was written down, in Greek, but soon after, it was translated into other languages, too, in Armenia, Egypt and Syria.⁸ As the faith moved west and reached Rome, people wanted to read the gospels in their native language, Latin.

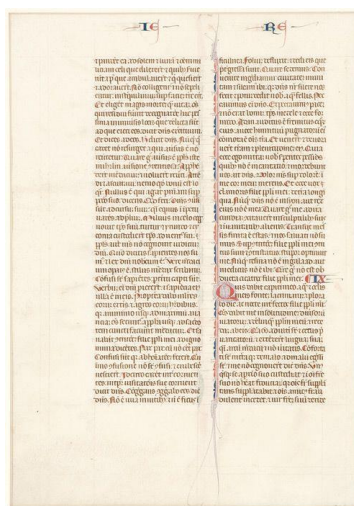
But when the gospels reached Rome, something changed. The Romans were very good at running things. They had well-disciplined armies that conquered much of Europe, as far north as England, as far south as Libya. They had good engineers for building roads and bridges, some of which are still with us. They had a mentality that saw the world as a collection of objects

⁷ https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/421/APPA/Briefs/DiscussionPaper_NAFC_e.pdf, p.3.

⁸ <https://www.skypoint.com/members/waltzmn/Versions.html>

which could be moved around.⁹ Each thing was separate from every other thing. And they liked to be in charge of all those things – people, animals, houses, money, countries. This is how they managed to conquer such a vast area. This attitude affected how they viewed Christianity. It was under Roman influence that Christians created creeds, common statements of faith. They also insisted that everyone worship in the same way and celebrate Easter at the same time of year. There should be one kind of Christianity for all Christians – the Roman kind.

This attitude extended to the Bible, too. The Roman Catholic Church wanted everyone to use the Latin Bible, even if the local people did not speak or understand Latin.



There should be one Bible to rule them all, to paraphrase Tolkien. This approach lasted for 1000 years.

Christianity became a religion that was imposed on people all over Europe in Latin, even though most people didn't understand Latin. Priests, monks, and nuns became the only people who understood the faith and the Bible. One thousand years ago, a church service like this would entail a priest standing here conducting mass in Latin, and saying prayers and singing hymns in Latin, while all of you would just stand, not understanding much, if anything.

500 years ago, this changed. Various rebels risked their lives by translating the Bible into their local languages. William Tyndale did it in English. He was burnt at the stake for it.¹⁰ Martin Luther went into hiding when he translated the Bible into German. In time, Protestants made this job 1 when going into new countries. They learnt the local languages and created translations of the Bible. It is estimated that in our time, there are now 250 different Bible translations.¹¹

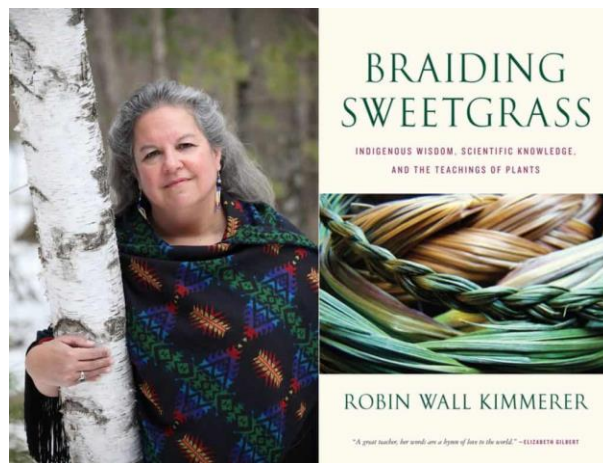
⁹ Owen Barfield, *History in English Words*, p. 58.

¹⁰ <http://www.tyndale.org/tsj06/daniell.html>

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-translation>

But as missionaries spread out into distant lands with the good news, they discovered that not everyone saw the world as they did. In many ways, we are all the heirs to the Roman and Greek way of seeing the world. Western culture thinks of the world as a bunch of objects to be manipulated and moved around. In English most of the words in conversation are nouns,¹² most of the rest are verbs. This makes sense to us, since the world is full of objects, and verbs are the words we use to move those many things around. The verb “lift” can be applied to chairs, rocks, bread, children, communion cups. One verb can affect many objects.

But as missionaries encountered non-Western people, they found that many other languages do not work this way. In Indigenous languages on Turtle Island, for example, most words are verbs, not nouns. This is something that Robin Wall Kimmerer talks about in her lovely book *Braiding Sweetgrass*.



She is an Indigenous woman and also a botanist. Like many Indigenous people, she didn’t learn her tribe’s language as a child, so she decided to learn it as an adult.

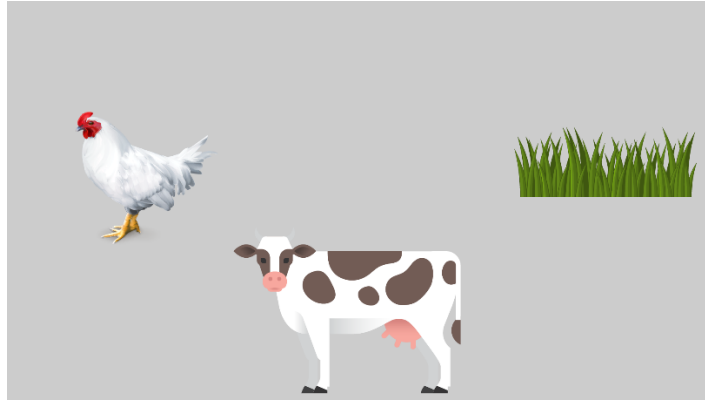
She says she found it incredibly difficult. The reason was that not only were there different words for everything, but there was also a different way of knowing the world embedded in that language.

One example she gives has to do with water. In our language, a bay is a sheltered indentation in the shore that contains water. Like Hudson’s Bay, or Georgian Bay. A Bay is a noun. In her language, Potawatomi, a bay is a verb. Water chooses whether it wants to be a bay or a lake or an ocean. So, a bay is a verb, something water does on purpose, by choice. Just as I choose to run, water chooses to be a bay.¹³ In their language, only objects made by human beings are considered inanimate. Everything else is alive. There is even a verb for Saturday because days choose which day they will be.

¹² <https://www.talkenglish.com/vocabulary/top-1500-nouns.aspx>

¹³ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (Minneapolis, 2013), Learning the Grammar of Animacy chapter.

The way we see and think about the world is not universal. It is actually quite specific to the European Western civilization. Here's an example that anthropologists use to test how people view the world.



Which of these two objects belong together?

Most people in the West say chicken and cow, since they are both animals. But when this test is administered to people in Asia, they usually say cow and grass. The reason is that they feel that the cow has a relationship with the grass since cows eat grass. Cows don't interact with chickens, so there is no reason to put them together.¹⁴ Relationship is what defines how the world works in Asian thought, not the qualities of objects. This difference in thinking is not based in genetics. People of Asian origin who grow up in Canada usually choose the two animals. Our cultures affect how we think and see the world, and those different ways of thinking become part of our languages.

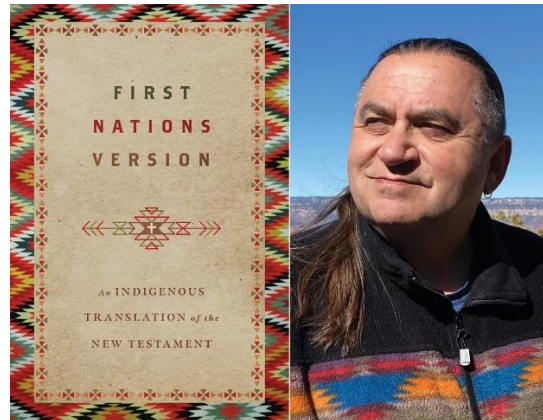
The Pentecost story suggests that God values linguistic diversity, and by extension, many ways of seeing the world. That story could have been written differently. It could have said that when the 12 disciples received the fiery holy spirit, and they were told to go out and proclaim the good news in just one language. But that's not what happened. Instead, it was written with the clear intention that when the spirit went out to meet different cultures and peoples, it would speak to them in their own languages. And that means the way their languages taught them to see the world would be relevant to the mission of the spirit. Many versions of Christianity are assumed and promoted in the Pentecost story, not one.

It may be that this was meant to help us avoid the risk of trying to think all in the same way. Just as biodiversity matters for maintaining a healthy ecosystem, so too, do we need a diversity of ways of seeing the world. Perhaps it is meant to create a system of checks and balances, so if one way started to endanger the world, other ways can speak up and say there is an alternative. At a time when our culture seems determined to pollute the world, change the

¹⁴ Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*, (New York, 2003), p. 140.

climate and risk the lives of all other species, now seems like a very good time to listen to some other points of view.

Last year, a historic Bible translation was published by a Canadian publishing house. It is an Indigenous version of the New Testament, written in English.



Its author, Terry Wildman, knew that few Indigenous people know their tribal languages anymore.¹⁵ So, he translated the gospels reflecting Indigenous ways of understanding the world.

In this version, objects and people become active, embedded in relationships.

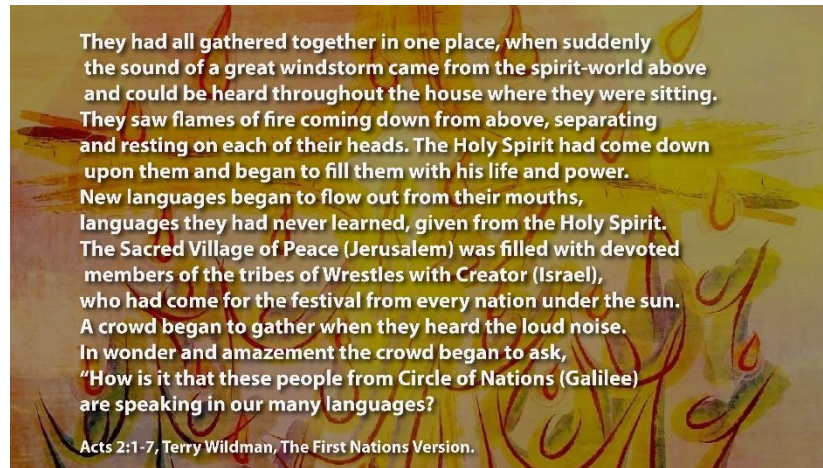


So, in this Bible, Peter's name is "Stands on Rock". God is "Maker of Life". For Jesus, the name is "Creator Sets Free". People's names contain verbs and relationships. This is not an idle invention.

Jesus' name in Hebrew is Jeshua, which means God Saves. But because we think in terms of discrete objects, we think of Jesus as just being a person, not a process. The Indigenous Bible is closer to the original meaning when it calls Jesus "Creator Sets Free."

¹⁵ Terry Wildman., *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*

In the Pentecost story, after the crowd hears the men of Galilee speaking in different languages, Peter explains what is happening. Here's what that sounds like in this Indigenous translation:



Text: They had all gathered together in one place, when suddenly the sound of a great windstorm came from the spirit-world above and could be heard throughout the house where they were sitting. They saw flames of fire coming down from above, separating and resting on each of their heads. The Holy Spirit had come down upon them and began to fill them *with his life and power*. New languages began to flow out from their mouths, languages they had never learned, given from the Holy Spirit. The Sacred Village of Peace (Jerusalem) was filled with devoted members of the tribes of Wrestles with Creator (Israel), *who had come for the festival* from every nation under the sun. A crowd began to gather when they heard the loud noise. In wonder and amazement the crowd began to ask, "How is it that these people from Circle of Nations (Galilee) are speaking in our many languages?"

God is always more than we can ever know or express. God is by definition too much for human minds to ever contain in our thoughts. And for that reason, to approximate what God is like, we need to be open to many voices and ways of thinking, not just one. Seeing the world as a collection of objects is very helpful for creating technology. Seeing the world as composed of relationships helps with maintaining a sacred harmony. The Pentecost vision of one fire dividing into many flames suggests that we are called to listen to the good news as it is heard and expressed in many tongues. Many ways of knowing, not just one. Let us affirm that when men and women see visions and feel the urgings of the spirit, they will be found in all nations, speaking in all tongues, in ways both delightful and confounding. As long as God is more than we can conceive, we need all the help we can get to understand what the Spirit wants us to do next. Let us be open to these perspectives and have the humility to admit when our approach has its limitations.

Amen.