Sermon on Acts 2:8
CCRC, 8 June 2025
Rev. Tom Bomhof
In Our Own Language

Dear Friends of God,
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Pentecost is a radical act of communication. We get caught up in the loud wind, the tongues of fire on the disciple's heads, and the spectacle of the crowds gathering. Sometimes the Pentecost story is so spectacular, we are confused about what to do with it.

And yet the miracle of Pentecost is about communication, not confusion. The disciples didn't speak gibberish or in ecstatic utterances, or in the language of angels. They spoke known languages, understandable to diverse listeners.
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> Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs-we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit enabled the disciples to speak to those from all over the known world who had come to Jerusalem for a yearly feast. They got the message. They heard the wonders of God in their own language. What a miracle that really was.
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Pentecost tells us that Jesus wants to be known by everyone in the world. Jesus wants to reach every heart in its own language. Jesus started a mission that continues to this day. Even now we see this happening when the gospel is spoken in many different languages around the world. Just in this building there are people who came to faith when the gospel was spoken to them in their own language using a Bible in their own language.

Around the world there are churches speaking every imaginable language, praising God, telling the gospel story. Bible translators are busy translating the gospel into every known dialect in the world. They are getting closer to getting them all. Mass communication through different media—internet, TV, radio—send the word out in many languages on signals to the ends of the earth. We rightly see this as the on-going work of the Holy Spirit through the church. Our offering today helps get the message out to the ends of the earth.

Yet this isn't something that's far away. It's something that affects us here in Kitchener-Waterloo. We here in K-W are living among people who for some reason do not know the story or are not hearing of the wonders of God. Why don't they know it? How come they haven't heard it in a way that they can understand? What's going on?

Maybe the people around us have slowly started speaking a different language when it comes to faith. As Rev. Harold Percy, an Anglican rector from Toronto put it:

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> Our challenge is that the culture our congregations have been prepared to minister in no longer exists. Our congregations are essentially Christendom congregations, born in an age that assumed they would be ministering in a "Christian culture," in neighbourhoods populated by Christian people who would naturally associate with the church. There was no need to think about how to connect with these people because the culture ensured that the connection was already in place. In this cultural setting, the job of the church was to provide the neighbourhood with opportunities to worship, religiously oriented rites of passage and pastoral care. It was simply assumed that people would look to the church for these services, because people understood and accepted the message of the church and the church was an important part of their lives.
>
> Reverend Dr Harold Percy

But things have changed. I think we understand that. We aren't in the 1950's anymore. We aren't even in the 1980's anymore. Our neighbours are speaking a different language.

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I've been learning that just as people speak different *verbal* language, people also today speak different "languages" of culture, experience, worldview, skepticism, hope, and despair.

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Some people speak scientific/rational language: putting a priority on evidence and logic. With two universities in the area, especially one that focuses so much on science, technology, engineering and math, this is a language spoken around here.

Some people speak emotional/experiential language: putting a priority on connecting through feelings and personal stories. Things are true if they are from your lived experience. People who refer to "my truth" are speaking this language.

Some people are so immersed in social media, imagery and short-form content that they practically speak a visual/digital language. If it's not intuitive, they don't read it.

There are others yet who speak a secular/non-religious language. They are unfamiliar with traditional Christian terms or concepts. I spoke to someone the other day who practices gratitude. Which is a beautiful thing. Yet he didn't identify to whom he was grateful. Another person I talked to was grateful to the universe for the good things in her life. These people are spiritual, but not religious. They don't identify a personal being at the centre of the universe.

There is justice/activism language for those passionate about social change, gender equality, racial harmony, environmental justice, truth and reconciliation. They are impatient with thought patterns that keep things the way they are.

And still others speak existential/meaning-seeking language, grappling with purpose and meaning in a complex world. I once had conversations with a young woman who was getting more involved with ancient pagan rituals, trying to be more connected to the rhythms of the

earth. I recently spoke to someone recently who was interested in knowing more about worldviews and where he fits in the world.

I'm also learning that in our culture, people have been busy deconstructing their faith. Yet they are still speaking the language of justice and racial harmony. They are tired of hypocrisy and lots of talk. They want to do things that change the world and do the planet some good. There is distrust of authority and institutions, yet people look for authentic, organic community. They want spirituality, but not the institutional church. And many of them haven't given up on Jesus. There is something about Jesus that still draws them.

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How do we, empowered by the same Spirit, translate the eternal truth of the Gospel into these modern "languages" so that people say, "Are not all these who are speaking Christians? And how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?" (Acts 2:7-8). How is the Spirit moving us to act and proclaim in ways that people who come along say, "I am hearing about Jesus in ways that make sense to me?"

Missional leaders Eric Swanson & Rick Rusaw point to this as a key challenge for our day:

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> All over the world, we meet pastors and Christian leaders who almost simultaneously have come to the conclusion that unless their church is engaged in the conversation, rhythms, needs, and dreams of their communities, it's not the church that Jesus wants them to be.
>
> Eric Swanson & Rick Rusaw <u>The Externally Focused Quest: Becoming the Best Church FOR the Community</u>

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When we conceive of ourselves as being not just *in* Kitchener/Waterloo, but *for* Kitchener/Waterloo, when we think of ourselves as part of the mission of God here and now, when we start asking ourselves the question "What would be good news for the people I know in KW?", when we start engaging the community through love, service and blessing, we are going to be used by the Spirit to speak the language of our community. Somehow the wonders of God will be declared by the likes of you and me. Here. In the neighbourhood.

Speaking the language of our time means we emphasize the love of God, the person of Jesus, and the transformative power of the Spirit, and the transformative kingdom of God. The disciples on the day of Pentecost don't speak about new rules. They speak about a new relationship and a new leader.

We have something to offer to those who are navigating mental health, career stress, relationships, and social issues already now. The disciples didn't speak good news as something far away and something you enjoy after you die. This new life is not just about the afterlife, but abundant life now.

On the Day of Pentecost, the church moved from the building to the streets. The church moved from scared huddled group hiding inside a building to the public square. Walls of division came down and the glories of God were heard.

Pentecost wasn't about the disciples shouting louder; it was about the listeners hearing clearly. The ongoing mission of Pentecost is to be bridge-builders, translators of grace, making the ancient story vibrantly relevant for today.

So ask the Spirit to empower you to be a communicator of the Good News in your own networks, friendships, families and neighbourhoods, using the "language" that your friends, family, and colleagues can understand.

The Spirit continues to do those miracles of communication through us. In our culture that has so rapidly become post-Christian, the Spirit still surprises us, using us despite ourselves, miraculously empowering us to tell the wonders of God in ways in which people respond with joy,

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we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own language!

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