

C Pentecost 6.5.22

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

Focus Statement: God reaches us so we can reach others.

*Mimi ni mholanzi* means “I am Dutch” in Swahili. This is a completely useless phrase for me to know in Swahili, because, as most of you know, I am not Dutch. My strongest cultural identity, outside of American, is Swedish. My father is English and German, though his family most closely identifies as “from Kansas,” a cultural identity all its own with a language consisting of putting r’s in words they don’t belong, like wash, and adding an extra syllable to the word milk. Anyway, point being, I’m not Dutch, and the fact that I can say that I am is not going to help much in communicating with Swahili speakers.

Now by this point you’re probably asking, ok Pastor, sure, but why are you trying to learn Swahili in the first place? I’m trying to learn Swahili because, if you read the Trumpet yet you might have heard, we’re sharing space in the community garden this summer with members of the Congolese refugee community who have settled in Battle Creek. Many, though not all, of them, speak English better than I speak any other language so communication is not an issue. But I want to try and learn at least some Swahili because I want to make them feel welcome. I’m hoping that trying to learn their language will communicate to them how glad I am to have them here. Unfortunately, Swahili turns out to be kind of a hard language, with grammatical rules unlike any other language I have experience with, so thus far *Mimi ni Mholanzi* is as far as I’ve gotten. I can also talk about a child *mtoto* and more than one child, *watoto*, and I can identify a farmer, *mkulima*. Those might be a little helpful, much more than the word for Dutch will probably ever be.

It's a good Sunday to be thinking about languages because it's Pentecost Sunday, the day when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they "began to speak in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them ability." As they were speaking, "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" heard them and asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galilean? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native languages...them speaking about God's deeds of power?" What's always impressed me about Pentecost is that it wasn't that everyone was suddenly able to understand the disciples' language, but that they were able to hear the disciples in their own language. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the words of the disciples were translated into the native languages of each person standing there. Pentecost was not a day of unity so much as a glorious celebration of diversity and understanding that God speaks to different people in different ways.

Guys, this matters. It matters to be able to hear God, to meet God, in your own native language. Last week I was talking with a couple of members of the Congolese community about finding a worshipping community in Battle Creek. "Of course God can speak to you in any language," one of them said, "but we miss hearing the Word of God in our language." Pentecost is the promise that the one message of the one God doesn't change, but it does translate. To use a modern buzzword, God "culturally commutes" to meet the needs of God's people.

Let's pause real quick and take a look at the Genesis reading. Pentecost is sometimes portrayed as the undoing of this story from Genesis, but I don't think that's what's going on here. To summarize, this is from Genesis chapter eleven, so, it's early. So early that "the

whole earth had one language.” Then the people got together and decided to “build... a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and... make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” God took one look at this and was like, oh no. These people are becoming too powerful. “They are one people, and they have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing they propose will now be impossible for them.” So God scattered them abroad across the face of all the earth and confused their language. One way to read this is that diversity is a punishment. The commentary I read joked that the child forced to take French in High School might see a variety of languages as God’s retribution. But, that same commentary went on to say, there is a different way to read the Tower of Babel story as a story not of divine punishment, but of a God whose vision, as always, is ever so much vaster than our own. Look at the problem God was addressing with the people of Babel, that they wanted to build a tower and make a name for themselves, so that they could not be scattered across the earth. But, this is chapter eleven of the book of Genesis. In other words, the very beginning of the Bible. Remember what God said in chapter one after humans were created? God said, “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” Now, a conversation about what that verse means will take more time than I get in a sermon, but the point is, build a tower to heaven so you can stay in one place is not the same as “fill the earth.” In fact, one could argue “build a tower so you can stay in one place” is the opposite of “fill the earth.” The commentary I was reading argues that diversity is not punishment from God, rather diversity is the vision of God. God’s dream for God’s creation was a variety of people, languages, and cultures spread out across the whole earth, the *imago dei*, the image of God, in full display not in sameness but in the full range of humanity.

Pentecost is a celebration of that full range of humanity, and God's love for it all. Pentecost is the day when the Holy Spirit loosened the tongues of the disciples so they could tell the Good News of Jesus in languages they could not understand, so that others could hear God's love.

I've been talking a lot about language, but I think this translating ability of God is broader even than language. Language, after all, is just one way in which the many facets of God are revealed. June is Pride month, we know there are a variety of gender identities, expressions, and orientations. I had been familiar with the acronym LGBTQIA+, I recently heard 2S, for two-spirit included as well. Two-spirit is an indigenous term, its inclusion recognizes not just the variety of experiences of gender, but that different cultures also experience gender in different ways. There are also differences in socio-economic culture. Woman's Co-op, and I know many of you from Trinity as well, have done a lot of work around Ruby Payne's Hidden Rules of upper, middle, and poverty classes, and the challenges in commuting between those experiences. There are differences in abilities, both physical and mental. Neurodivergent people experience the world differently than the so-called neurotypical—I say "so called" because who is to say what is or is not typical. There's also just straight up preferences and familiarity. I grew up in the Lutheran tradition, organ music, communion every Sunday, and standing up and sitting down on cue is part of my worship heritage. Some people prefer praise bands. The Quakers prefer sitting in silence until the Spirit moves someone to speak. These are all equally valid ways of encountering God. Praise band worship isn't better because it's louder, Lutheran

worship isn't better because Martin Luther liked organs, its all worship, it's just what speaks to different people.

Which gets us to the challenge, dear people of God. If the good news is, God speaks to us in the language—I'm using the word language metaphorically here to stand in for a broad scope of meaning—God speaks to us in the language that we can best experience God through, then the challenge is for those of us who have heard God's voice. And again, heard here, also metaphorical, we hear God in lots of ways, only some of them having to do with our actual ears. The challenge for those of us who have heard God's voice, how can we then, like the disciples, meet other people where they are at with the message of God's love for them, in a language which they can understand?

I think the way we do that is by getting uncomfortable and by asking a lot of questions. By taking risks, being willing to learn, and being open to correction. Mostly, honestly, I think it means being willing to fail, to screw up, and to ask for forgiveness. Because we will not always say or do the right thing to make someone feel welcome or included. Sometimes the best of our intentions are hurtful, and that's ok as long as we're willing to ask forgiveness and try again. I honestly believe it is better to try and fail, then to sit on the sidelines and not try at all.

And here's the Good News dear people of God. More good news actually, since the first Good News was that God speaks to us how we need to hear God. The second good news is that God not only speaks to us, but God speaks through us. In our Gospel reading for today,

Jesus told the disciples that they, that we, would do the works that God had sent him to do, and in fact would do greater works than these, because he was going to the Father. The works are greater not because of the works themselves, but because Jesus had completed his work, we are now empowered with carrying on that work, the work of revealing the glory of God to the world.

Dear people of God, there is work to be done. It is good work, it is God's work, and now, it is our work. The God who loved us enough to slip into skin and walk among us, through the Holy Spirit now sends us in our skin, to love others. Thanks be to God. Amen.