

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday Worship, May 19, 2024
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan
Sermon: “The Language of Prophecy”
Scriptures: Acts 2:1-21

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2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Peter Addresses the Crowd

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews[a] and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17 ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.

19 And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

20 The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Sermon: The Language of Prophecy

Many of you may know that I speak Arabic. When I first started learning Arabic, my teacher, a 20-year-old girl named Abeer, handed me a packet of colloquial phrases that work as greetings or niceties in particular contexts. That packet was enormous and just about 0% of it translated into English appropriately. For example, a very normal conversation between friends in Arabic may go:

Friend A: "Our peace upon all of you."

Friend B: "Our peace upon all of you also."

Friend A: "Morning of flowers!"

Friend B: "Morning of light!"

Friend A: "What's your color?"

Friend B: "I praise God! What's your news?"

Friend A: "I praise God! Sweetheart, I love your shirt, it's very pretty!"

Friend B: "You may have it."

Friend A: "God bless your hands and your whole family may they have good health and happiness, God willing."

Friend B: "God bless your work and your children, may you have many and your life filled with happiness, God willing."

Friend A: "Thank you but I don't want the shirt, it looks better on you."

Friend B: "My blood is heavy."

Friend A: "May God fill you with lightness of spirit and grace."

Friend B: "You are from his family, my sweetest love."

As you see, Arabic is almost non-translatable to English because it's filled with so much language that we would not use in normal conversation, including references to God every other sentence. Also, understanding cultural nuances such as complimenting someone on something requires that the complimented person must turn over the coveted item to the complimenter lest God punish them for inciting envy in another person.

That packet Abeer gave me, which included all these cultural nuances and more, almost made me turn tail and forget attempting to learn a new language. I was prepared to learn simple equations like the word "chicken" in English translates directly to "dijaj" in Arabic, not learn a whole new complicated system on how to interact with people!

I imagine that Arabic is not alone in being entirely different from English, beyond direct translations like "chicken" to "dijaj". When we learn a different language, we're opened up to a whole new world of communication, not only in being able to make different sounds with our mouths that make sense to someone else, but we also have to re-learn how we interact with each other at a primal level. At Pentecost, the disciples were suddenly overwhelmed with learning all those different systems of interactions

among them at once. I imagine the anxiety I had when Abeer told me that you can't compliment other people's things in Arabic was multiplied 20 fold for the disciples in that moment as they were greeted by an onslaught of new communication patterns and cultural norms that they miraculously understood at once. "They must be drunk!" would probably also be my response in suddenly obtaining that much information!

At Pentecost, God opened up the disciples' hearts to learning that much information because He knows that creating genuine human connection that results in transformation of the soul involves needing to understand the variety of communication systems that He blessed us with. While complimenting a shirt in English is considered a nice thing to say, complimenting a shirt in Arabic results in a panicked need to discard the shirt. While letting someone turn left out of a crowded intersection is considered polite in Hawaii, doing so in New York would result in at best a car crash and at worst a chaotic road rage incident. These differences are important to know when you're attempting to form relationships with new people.

If we are meant to go out and spread the Good News of Jesus, learning the communications systems of different peoples and cultures is essential. What makes sense to one person could be totally offensive to another. We will find ourselves frustrated if we go out to greet our community and call them to Christ only to find that we've made some sort of cultural blunder in interacting with them and subsequently alienated them from us. Even among people who speak the same verbal language, there are huge differences – military culture, or Gen Z culture, or Hawaiian American culture or Chinese American culture all have their own nuances despite all speaking English fluently.

Unfortunately, God has not blessed us with the gift of the first Pentecost in which He suddenly opens our ears to understanding all these different cultural nuances and communication patterns at the same time. Yet, the gift of Pentecost despite not having this miraculous moment from 2,000 years ago is the gift of prophecy that is placed on every believer's heart.

The word "prophecy" means to predict something. The prediction of Pentecost is that God can uplift and change every soul, no matter what language or communication system they use. Jesus came for English speakers, Hawaiian speakers, Gen Z, Kupuna, and everyone in between. He came to unite us in faith, not despite of our diversity, but through it. When we are convicted to prophesy this Good News, nothing can stop us to learn the languages of those we seek to invite to His Kingdom.

I persisted in learning Arabic even though learning all the cultural nuances of the language was daunting because I predicted, or prophesied, that I would be more effective at ministering to the broken hearted refugees of Syria, Iraq, and Palestine if I could learn their communication system. I didn't throw up my hands and declare the mission too hard. Instead, I continued on to become proficient in that language because I felt God calling me to be with the people of that language at that time in my

life. God absolved in me the purpose of His prophecy to spread the Kingdom of God, and that conviction kept me trudging through all those packets of cultural phrases so many years ago.

Despite the diversity of humankind, we believers are united by the language of prophecy. We're united by the belief that God seeks to bring all His children back to Him. We're united by the belief that God has changed our lives and guides us in everything that we do, and that He can gift this amazing power into others, too. When God calls us into prophecy, that is – predicting that others will be transformed through Jesus – nothing can stop us from learning the languages that assist us in our work.

You might feel scared about the prospect of learning the cultural norms of younger generations, or military people, or any different kind of person who walks through our doors in the months to come. You may feel discouraged or anxious that you won't be able to connect to them. Or maybe you won't want to connect to the people coming in the door. You may wonder: what kind of people are these new programs going to bring? What if they change the culture of the church?

If we believe that God's calling for us at Pentecost to go out and spread the Good News is true, then we have to be willing to do the hard work of learning those new languages. We have to be willing to dive into new communication patterns, new understandings, new people and all the diversity of thought and experience that they bring. I've learned so much from people living in shelters, refugee camps, old folks' homes, and a variety of places that I've never lived or experienced. These experiences with people who are different from me have strengthened my conviction in the goodness of God and increased my faith. The power of His ability to heal all and renew all things was most present when I was with people that didn't share my cultural or literal language because it grew me to learn more about Him through the diversity of people that experienced Him across culture, language, and context. What an awesome God we have, that not only found me scared and homeless in New Orleans in 2005 – He also found Fatima scared and displaced in her tent in Northern Syria, or Keanu scared and displaced in the shelter in Honolulu! He works to bring home His children from all over the world, in every language, culture, and experience. This was God's gift to us at Pentecost – the openness to learn languages that aren't our own in order to increase our faith and spread His Kingdom.

I ask this conviction of you as we approach our new programs. Be open to the wind of the Spirit calling you to learn new languages and unite those languages under Christ. Go forward without fear or hesitation that you're not good enough, or that they're not good enough. God is calling for them to come home, no matter who they are and where they've come from. Persevere through learning with the conviction that you are called to prophesy His message and uplift that prophesy in others and the diversity that they bring to the church. You can do this, because God empowered you to prophesy on the day of Pentecost. May it be so.
Amen.