

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35,37
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 20:19-23

Pentecost A
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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The Language Of Our Hearts

Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire. Enlighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us then nothing else matters. Be with us, we pray in the name of your Beloved. Amen¹

In 2008 I spent three months in Panama, most of it with a seminary program. We traveled to Panama to learn its history, about America's ongoing colonialist presence, and to learn about the Anglican church there. We went to listen, to get out of our comfort zones and to create relationships with people different from ourselves. We served in various churches, most of them without priests of their own. We were faith leaders for many congregations, sharing our experiences and our lives with people, most of whom were profoundly poor, profoundly generous, and profoundly different from ourselves.

Not being a Spanish speaker, I wanted to take language lessons, so I traveled to Panama weeks before my classmates did. I was to stay in the diocesan compound and have daily lessons with a Spanish language teacher. I was to be met at the airport by the head of the program in Panama. And while some of arrangements seemed vague, I was assured by my professor that even though things didn't run like clockwork in Panama, all would be well.

And for a very brief moment, that seemed true. When I arrived, I was welcomed with great warmth and enthusiasm. I was taken to the diocesan compound and introduced to several people. I was given a tour of the grounds, then taken to the kitchen and told I could eat whatever was there and that the next day we would head out to the markets where I would be able to buy the food of my choosing. I knew once the other seminarians arrived, we would be traveling and worshipping and eating together, but for these weeks of language lessons, I'd need to fend for myself. No problem, thought I, I've done that most all my adult life.

After eating some crackers and drinking some sort of soda that first night, I returned to my room. It was in a concrete block building, with open space at the top of the walls. I had a bed with sheets and a pillow, a towel and a rod to hang my clothes on. It was stiflingly hot. There were bugs of all sorts and sizes. And I was completely and utterly alone once the diocesan workers left for the day. It wasn't so much scary as it was unsettling. I had been told not to leave the campus because it wasn't safe. It was suggested that I stay in my locked room, though

¹ Adapted from a prayer by the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor

the bathroom was elsewhere. And so I sat on my bed that first night, attempted to read the Spanish language books I brought with me, and tried not to cry.

The next morning dawned beautiful and bright. My language instruction was to begin that day, and we were going into town to do some shopping. I was admonished to hold tight to my purse and keep alert at all times. I bought some beverages, some soup and vegetables that could be cooked in a single pot on a one burner stove, and cheese and crackers to soothe my soul. Our lunch that day was a Panamanian delicacy I could never have imagined and will never forget – calf's hoof soup in a styrofoam bowl. If you know me at all, you know I am an enthusiastic eater! I have to say, I had a little trouble with the calf's hoof soup. I did finish most of it. And that little, tiny bit of trouble I was having? Well, that was only the beginning.

My language teacher didn't show up that afternoon. My lessons had been arranged from the US. Apparently, there was a glitch or two and it took several days for the instructor to finally arrive. She spoke no English and I spoke no Spanish which could have turned out to be a great immersion experience except that it wasn't immersion. It was two hours in the afternoon, and we never did get very far. In the meantime, my host, the only English speaker around other than the Bishop and his wife, had a car accident and was totally out of commission. He did fully recover, thanks be to God, but he was laid up for several weeks. That left me on my own, and completely out of my element. The days were long, and the nights were longer. The language teacher stopped coming and I resorted to my phrase books. I prayed, mostly without ceasing, but it was that sort of desperate "help me, help me, help me" kind of praying that comes when I find myself utterly ill-equipped to deal with what's happening. It definitely wasn't the "come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful" sort of praying.

I could go on and on about everything else that went wrong on that trip – from the Panamanian program director being laid up, to my seminarian program director being attacked in her car and subsequently leaving the country, to being robbed in that very store I was taken to my first day, to finding myself face to face with an armed gunman who walked into a rectory I was staying in ... but the moment I remember most clearly about that journey was what wasn't wrong. It was seeing my fellow seminarians walk off the plane and hearing them greet me in my own mother tongue. Language is so much more than words. Our language, spoken or heard, reflects our culture, history, psychology, and even our spirituality. Language orients us in the world. After weeks of understanding so very little of what was going on around me, hearing my own language was balm for my soul. I think about that every year when Pentecost rolls around.

Pentecost means 50th. For Christians it's the 50th day after Easter, but for Jews, it is 50 days following the first wheat offering of Passover. Also called Shavuot or the festival of weeks, Pentecost had for centuries been a celebrated pilgrimage festival. Faithful Jews from far and wide traveled to Jerusalem, bringing with them offerings of the first fruits of their annual harvests, in hopes of God's blessing. People with different customs, different clothing, different ideas, ideals and languages all converged in Jerusalem for a festival they thought would be like

every other Shavuot they'd been to. But suddenly a huge wind blew in filling the whole city with such force and noise that no one could even hear themselves speak.

When that wind died down, there was a cacophony of voices so loud that people all throughout the city came running, calling out to others who called out to others who called out to others, all of them running to see the tongues that looked like fire and to hear of the wonderful works of God told to each one of them in their own native language. People from every nation under heaven heard those disciples speaking as if God's loving, reconciling and redemptive story was just for them. And it was.

The Holy Spirit Jesus had breathed into the disciples on that last night before he died, came into the hearts of thousands of people in Jerusalem that day, speaking God's mighty deeds of power in God's language of love – the language that is every person's mother tongue. It was the language that made them a community of believers marked as God's own, the community that became the new church, the Body of Christ in the world. When God's Holy Spirit came into God's people, that Spirit came into community, making even more community. We're told that little church went from 120 people to 3,000 in just one day, and the disciples who thought their story was over when Jesus told them he was returning to his Father, realized their story was just beginning.

The people who had come from every nation under heaven that day, thought they were coming back to the same festival they had come to a year before. But everything had changed. When the Holy Spirit came into all those ordinary, imperfect, separate and distinct people, they knew themselves to be one, in what would come to be called the Body of Christ. God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus alive in the world then, alive in the world now, moves in us and through us, continuing God's mission of peace and justice and love in the world. We are the way God continues to so love this world.

Just like resurrection, Pentecost wasn't a one-time event that happened some 2,000 years ago. If Pentecost is God breaking into the world, turning things upside down, gathering us into one and setting the church on a new course, then Pentecost can't possibly be only an agricultural feast or the birthday of the church or hearing in your own language or even the one time coming of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is now, happening right here in this community. God is calling us into new ways of being, new ways of serving, new ways of welcoming, new ways of seeing and speaking and listening. From the Musician Search Committee to the Strategic Planning Team, to every stakeholder group at St Barnabas and every single one of you... all of us need to be looking and listening and pondering and praying, doing our very best to discern just what God is calling this community to be and to do. God is breaking in here and now in this place. Our work is to listen and to respond. Jesus has promised that God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit who speaks to each one of us in the language of our hearts, will be with us always. So with God's Holy Spirit present with us and in us, we will begin the new story God is calling us into.

Please pray with me.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.