

Language Lessons

It is good to be back in this place, but it is still strange to be here without you. I can picture you in your pews, but now I can also imagine your faces in other places as I see your smiles float up on a screen and as you click heart emojis. The heart emoji has become a virtual “amen” of sorts. Emojis are a new language for many of us, one I wonder if we’ll still use when it is safe for us all to gather together in person again. When we do gather in this space again I wonder if we’ll find a way to engage and even whisper “amen” as the Spirit leads us to. So many of us have learned new languages over the past few months. We’ve learned to speak Zoom and Facebook live and Ring and Skype. Some of us have begun studying French or Spanish, too, while others have become proficient in emojis, the language of hearts, thumbs up, and even the newer emoji that Facebook tells me speaks a word of care or compassion. This need for learning a new language has been thrust upon us by our inability to rely solely on the languages we were already fluent in, the familiar languages of hugs and high fives, handshakes, whispers, and subtle nods and grins. Distance has changed us or changed the skills and even the gifts we need to still be us.

Each year around this time we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in and among the ragtag band of disciples in Jerusalem on Pentecost. It was not the first Pentecost, of course. Pentecost was and is celebrated by our Jewish siblings even today. Shavuot, the festival of weeks is observed seven weeks or fifty days after Passover. The community celebrates God’s giving of the 10 Commandments at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness:

It is noteworthy that the holiday is called the time of the *giving* of the Torah, rather than the time of the *receiving* of the Torah. The sages point out that we are constantly in the process of receiving the Torah that we receive it every day, but it was first given at this time. Thus it is the giving, not the receiving, that makes this holiday significant.¹

This post also points out that observant Jews stay up all night and keep vigil studying this gift every year. As they study, the community recalls the ancient promise made by God to the beloved, ornery people of God to be

¹ <http://www.jewfaq.org/holidayc.htm>

our God always while calling us to be faithful in our learning the language of covenant in worshipping only the one God, in loving God above all else, and in loving our neighbors by not stealing from them, telling lies about them, cheating them, or murdering them. We are still learning, still receiving, because this simple promise is stunningly difficult to keep, at least on our end it seems.

So faithful Jews from all over the empire gather in Jerusalem just 50 short days, seven brief weeks after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection to celebrate God's giving of the law. Christ has been taken up after telling the disciples that they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and beyond after waiting for a bit, of course. While they are all together, the Holy Spirit blows in and sets the ablaze. The disciples begin to speak, boldly declaring "the mighty works of God" in languages that are not their own. Those around them are amazed that these rough-around-the-edges Galileans are suddenly conversant in a multitude of tongues, stunned to hear this little band of believers declaring the saving work of God with courage and passion out in the streets, in and amongst people from all over.

The Spirit does not stop on that one Pentecost, Paul reminds us. Much like the notion that the receiving of the law is an ongoing daily practice, the receiving of the Spirit is unending, too. The Spirit gives and keeps giving, Paul insists. The gifts are varied, but the giver remains the same, as does the purpose of all the gifts—"for the common good." Apparently the Corinthian church is at odds over which gifts are more valuable, which gifts are preferred, and Paul wants to make it crystal clear that such a hierarchy has no place in the church. He insists that every gift is essential, that every gift is just that—a gift, a God-breathed gift—to be used to declare the saving work of God in Jesus Christ for the common good, the shared benefit of all.

It is widely understood that it is too dangerous to do church the way we are accustomed to doing church right now. It is not safe to gather, hug, shake hands, share communion, or sing as a gathered body. But I would argue it is also too dangerous *not to be* the church right now. And the crucial good news is that being church is not dependent solely on our gathering within these walls. We are being the church as we pray, sing, serve, and witness out in the world. I do not believe God sent the virus as a wake-up call. I do however believe God has been trying to call us out of the safety of our buildings for centuries, that God has been trying to shove if not kick the church out of her beloved buildings for a while now. The many and varied gifts God's Spirit has

showered and continues to shower on us in Christ's name are not and have never been intended solely for us and ours. Our gifts of singing, praying, advocating, serving, listening, and offering compassion are God's gifts to the world through us. They were never intended to be our own secret language used only on Sundays or exclusively in this space, solely for those who sit next to us in our pews. Nor are we the only recipients. Others have God-breathed gifts, too. And I would argue the world and we need these gifts like never before.

As you well know, the world is on fire right now. In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many others, protests have poured into the streets nationwide, including the streets of Harrisburg. Our African American siblings and other people of color are rightfully angry and frightened. Systemic racism and white supremacy have been the death knell for too many for too long, and the church has been complicit. While I am not comfortable with the rage I see on my screen, I must confess that I too have been complicit in supporting the systems that continue to oppress my siblings, beloved children of God one and all. I have not heeded the cries. I have not fully understood that racism did not end with the abolition of slavery or the passage of the Civil Rights act. I have not paid attention. I have not spoken up, nor have I listened.

On that Pentecost those gathered in Jerusalem are astounded that they can hear something of worth, something life-giving and world-rocking from a group of ragtag, unrefined women, tax collectors, and fishermen. They are astounded by the glorious words spoken by a group of Galileans who follow a crucified teacher. And yet they listen because the language they hear is their own.

I mentioned that many of us have become students of new languages of late. We learn them and adopt them because we want to connect with others even when we are separated for safety's sake. We long to share our thoughts, our joys, our frustrations, and our sadness, and we long to hear theirs. A colleague suggests that there is one more language the church might need to learn. As fires raged in cities nationwide in the summer of 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King was asked about the uprisings, the riots that accompanied those fires. While he held strongly to the work and witness of nonviolence, he wisely declared that "a riot is the language of the unheard."² It is not taught on Duolingo. There is no app, no shortcut for this. Instead we learn by listening to

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/mlk-a-riot-is-the-language-of-the-unheard/#x>

those who have been speaking it all their lives. And if we are to hear and embody the gospel fully, it is a language we need to pay attention to.

Because the gospel is not a Hallmark card. The love and justice of Jesus Christ are not simply about our being comforted or made comfortable. The gospel is not about holding hands and making nice. Many are quick to invoke Dr. King's call to nonviolence as a way of dismissing the excruciating pain borne by people of color for centuries. As King's own son hastens to remind us, his father was hated and eventually killed for the ways he unsettled those in power. And in case we are tempted to forget, so was Jesus. Our cities are burning because God's children are dying. An African American mother of three boys shared that this week one of her sons "asked [her] what to do if he's ever pinned down by the police. [She writes,] I have no answer." Are we listening? This child is asking what language he must learn to save his own life simply because of the color of his skin. That is a language no one should have to learn.

So where does the church fit in all of this? A few weeks back another colleague wondered aloud:

Do we want to use the resources of time, talent, and treasure available to us to figure out protocols and practicalities for opening buildings in a way that might help people stay safe but will not be guaranteed?

Or...Do we want to use the resources of time, talent, and treasure available to us to be the body of Christ dispersed and deployed until it is safe for all people to return to our buildings without restrictions?³

I'm not sure it is about what we want any longer, if it ever was. Instead I wonder if it might be about where and who the Spirit is calling us to be. Could the flames around us be spurring us to something new? Could it be that God is less concerned with our figuring out how to sanitize and make this space safe for ourselves right now than God is with our using our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to work on making the world safe for our siblings to watch birds, go for a jog, walk home from the market wearing in a hoody, or sleep in their own beds? Yes, I am eager to gather with you in this place when it is safe to do so. Our gathering is still an important piece of who we are as the body of Christ. But on this Pentecost, when the world is on fire and the screams of grief and anger and weariness of our beloved siblings are begging to be heard, the church may just need to be "dispersed and deployed" for now.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/ckohlmann/posts/10156734643261222>

The Apostle Paul understands that the gospel is a matter of life and death. Those befuddled disciples gathered in Jerusalem do, too. Yes, the gospel brings life and salvation and love, but the gospel is not and never has been safe. When we cannot gather in this space, we are still the church, or we can be. We can listen to the laments of those who are grieving more than 100,000 lives lost to this virus. We can stand with those who have lost jobs and businesses. We can hold space for traumatized health care workers and those who have been isolated from loved ones. We can come alongside those who are struggling. We can learn from those for whom the American dream has always been an illusion. We can weep with those who have had to learn the language of safety, silence, and acceptability simply to survive and have been killed anyway. And we can embody the justice, mercy, love, and grace of a God who comes to us as brown-skinned baby boy born to an unmarried woman in an occupied state. We can serve and worship and receive the gifts given not only to us or only for us, but to a band of unexpected outsiders whose witness sets the world on fire through the power of God for the good of all.

Beloved siblings in Christ, the Spirit has blown in and set the church ablaze. We have all the God-breathed gifts we need. It is time to listen for the gospel in a new language. It is time for us to *be* church. It is too dangerous for us not to be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.