

Learning a New Language

“Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them in the native language of each.” (*Acts 2:5-6*)

What is it like to learn a new language? Despite what the commercials promise, it's perhaps at first a bit daunting. It takes discipline. A commitment of time. And if we are honest, engaging a different world. Asking a Chinese person “Have you eaten rice today,” may sound like a casual conversation starter, such as “Nice weather we're having.” But in a culture that historically has known hunger on a massive scale, it comes to mean something very different: “I hope your day began with the blessing of food.”

Today is Pentecost, the day commemorating the release of the Holy Spirit, the one Jesus promised who speaks for God, yet in a language very different. It *sounds* familiar—each witness on that day *understands the words* the disciples use but *not what they convey*—like reading the four point legalese on the back of a mortgage. Dumfounded, the onlookers ask, “What do these things *mean*?” Especially because the disciples, “*filled with the Holy Spirit*,” seemed touched and empowered by God in a very dramatic way.

Pentecost signifies the unleashing of the universal Spirit of God on the whole world, where before Jesus the Spirit had been the almost exclusive province of tiny Israel. Now it promises to explode like a windstorm wherever and to whomever the faithful take the message of Jesus; which message still needs to be spread abroad, especially in these perilous times, even at the threat of death.

But this is no spoken or written language. The Holy Spirit communicates in a language of a very different sort, a different way of knowing, the language of the soul in communion with God.

Jane and I have been married 36 years, and while there are times when we must think the other inhabits a different planet (sound familiar?), there are times when we can read each other without asking. The way a silence signals a certain mood or need. Or, I get “the look.” Gentleman, perhaps you're familiar with “the look”! We learn to read it with our children, our parents, and colleagues too. And sometimes we may miss those cues at our peril.

There's a host of unspoken languages; body language, for instance. I wonder if you've seen that fascinating new program on T.V. called “Lie to Me,” about a detective crew that reads body language to determine whether someone is telling the truth or lying. There is sign language, not just for the hearing impaired. A crane operator often relies on discreet hand signals from someone on the ground to deliver a load precisely. Music has its own language, both on paper and intuitively, especially in ensemble playing. Even as you sit here your body sends millions of silent memos to regulate cell growth, manage body systems, construct thoughts, and coordinate movement. The biology of all living organisms is coded in an alphabet of just four “letters” A C T and G. There are a host of computer and electronic communications languages, there is brail, and the feverish language of trading on the stock market floor. And on it goes. There is also the language of the Spirit of God.

When we are new to this way of knowing the Spirit it may be little more intelligible than the babble of infants. But as with any language, by degrees familiarity gives it shape. Just yesterday I heard Jane on the phone to our daughter Carolyn and eighteen month old Ellie, when Jane let out an ecstatic squeal. Ellie, who has already mastered Greek and Hebrew and now working on her English, had just said, “I love you, Nana.” Be still my heart.

The language of the Spirit has many forms. It has nothing to do with words—how can it, it is a universal language—yet it merges with the language of prayer. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8, when it comes to speaking with God we all get tongue-tied. I certainly do. In critical moments we may feel like a six-

year old standing before the school principal, God, meanwhile, laying a benevolent hand on us and whispering, "It's all right. Be still, and let my Spirit speak for you." In time we discover that that may be the best way to pray, just being still. As Isaiah tells us, "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One . . . In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." (*Isaiah 30:15*) Pure stillness. Isn't it extraordinary, God saying to us, as we to a frustrated child trying to pull on her new sneakers, "If you will just be still, I can help you. Let me help!" So, says Paul, "the Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought." This is a very different language.

The language of the Spirit of God can also be hid in the language of worship. After a call to a new church, a pastor colleague was making his rounds, and visiting an older parishioner in a nursing home. She had formerly come from Russia, and at a late age, so that she had never found her way into English. On their first visit he showed her his Bible and small communion case. She smiled endearingly, he knowing she did not understand a word he said, but the emblems of office spoke, nevertheless. He tried to talk. She stroked the pastor's hand. Then two things spoke from a different language. He began to pray the "Our father." Immediately her eyes brightened, her head bowed, and she in Russian he in English, the cadence hand in hand, they prayed together blending their languages as if they were one. Which, of course, they were.

Then he opened his communion case and began the brief liturgy for Holy Communion. "The body of Christ." "The cup of salvation." She in Russian, with trembling voice, responding with phrases so familiar from her Eastern Rite. Fifty years stood between them in language, culture and birth. For most of their lives, politically, they would have been considered enemies, but not there, not then. No interpreter was needed. Nor when he took his hand and placed it upon her head and gave the apostolic blessing.

The language of the Spirit is also discovered in beautiful serendipitous moments that steal upon the soul unannounced. Like William James, the brother of author Henry James. He was the founder of the psychology of religion. James had been hiking all day, and after reaching the summit of a challenging mountain, he sat for some time to collect himself. Suddenly, he discovered himself enveloped in the Spirit's intimacy that took his breath away. He went on to give the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen, and publish them in one of the most influential books of the last hundred years, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Next to the Bible, I still find it the most influential book I have ever read. I was so taken with it on first reading it ten years ago that I called a professor of the psychology of religion in the Midwest and asked him if he could recommend something more recent to supplement it. He paused for a moment, then said. "Nothing comes close."

I think, too, of John Wesley, then an Anglican cleric, stepping through a doorway off a London street in 1738, listening to a Moravian prayer service and a reading from the Preface to Martin Luther's *Commentary on Romans*, and finding "my heart strangely warmed." So began the monumentally influential worldwide Methodist movement. No ordinary language accounts for such things.

And this interior language, which we all know. It's from Homer Roger's book, *Uncommon Sense* (1989).

To those who know a little of Christian history probably the most moving of all the reflections it brings is not the thought of the great events and the well remembered saints, but of those innumerable millions of entirely obscure faithful men and women. Every one of his or her own individual hopes and fears and joys and sorrows and loves—sins and temptations and prayers—once every whit as vivid and alive as mine are now. They have left not the slightest trace in the world, not even a name, but have passed to God utterly forgotten by men. Yet each of them once believed and prayed as I believe and pray, and found it hard and grew slack and sinned and repented and fell again. Each of them worshiped at the Eucharist, and found their thoughts wandering and tried again, and felt heavy and unresponsive and yet knew—just as really and pathetically as I do these things . . . The sheer, stupendous quantity.

of the love of God which in this ever repeated action has drawn from the obscure Christian multitudes through the centuries is in itself an overwhelming thought.

Each of us already has what we need within. God has placed it there, God's own Rosetta Stone, the interpretative imprint of the Holy Spirit. The one who makes God intelligible to the seeking soul as no other language can.

Amen.