

A Spirit of Understanding
Acts 2:1–21; Genesis 11:1–9; 1 Corinthians 14:6–13
Sunday, May 23, 2021

When we adopted our son Brandon and he came home to us from South Korea, he was only ten months old, so he was just beginning to talk a little bit. He could only say a few words, but he had never been exposed to English when he lived in Korea, so *he* didn't understand *us*, and the only words he spoke were Korean baby talk, so *we* didn't understand *him*. And the first few months were really difficult for us. There was one thing he would always do early on in his time with us. He would say, "Ma ma ma ma." And *we* thought, "That's so cute! He's already saying *mama*! So he either wants his Korean foster mother, or he's talking about Jen!"

Hold onto that. Because another thing that happened is, when he came home to us, he came with a journal that his foster mother had kept every day that she had him. So from two days old to ten months old, she wrote in this journal about what he was doing each day. The only *problem* was, it was all written in Korean. So we had no idea what it said. We found a person who could translate it for us, but it was going to take several months. So we passed it along to her and waited.

About three months later, we got the journal back. You know how parents joke that they wish their kids came with instruction manuals? This was literally an instruction manual for our son. It told us *everything* about him. We're sitting there reading it, thinking, "Oh, so *that's* why he doesn't like to take baths. *That's* why he does this. *That's* how we get him to do that. This would have been *really* helpful *months ago*!" But one of the things we learned was that when he was saying, "Ma ma ma ma," he wasn't talking about his mama. That was apparently how he said he was *hungry*. So this whole time, he's been saying, "I'm hungry! I want food!" and we're saying, "Oh, how cute!" and doing everything but giving him food!

We were speaking different languages, and we couldn't understand him on our own. We needed someone to *help us* understand him. We had the journal, but we couldn't understand it on our own. We needed someone to *help us* understand it.

We hear this story of Pentecost in Acts, and it's kind of the same thing. A whole bunch of people from all over the world are gathered in Jerusalem for this holy day that commemorated God giving the law to Moses (that's what Pentecost was). But *because* they were all from different parts of the world, they all spoke different languages. They couldn't understand each other. They needed someone to *help* them understand each other.

Enter the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit comes among them, and the disciples begin speaking in the native tongues of each person there. God overcomes the barriers that divide them, and the Spirit makes it possible for them to *understand* each other. It's important to note that the many languages they speak are not just turned into the *same* language. Like they don't all just start speaking Hebrew or English. They are still speaking a plurality of languages. It's just that God helps them *understand* each other, where they are, even in the midst of their differences.

Scripture speaks in a plurality of voices. The books of the Bible were written over the course of 1,000 years by people in Israel and Egypt and Iran and Greece and Rome; by people who spoke Hebrew and Greek, two *very* different languages (not just in how they *look* and *sound*, but in their understanding of the world and how they require you to *think*). It was written by kings and shepherds and slaves and prophets and poets, all of whom experienced the world in *very* different ways. And scripture *reflects* that varied experience.

There is not just *one* gospel that tells the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. There are *four* gospels that tell the story of Jesus, and some of the stories in them are *very different* from one another. Last week we heard the story of Jesus' ascension. *Luke's* account of Jesus ascending into heaven is very different from *Mark's* account. In fact, Luke's account of the ascension in the *gospel* of Luke is very different from the one that Luke writes in the book of *Acts*. Matthew's gospel does not even *have* an ascension, and neither does *John's* gospel. Each of those books has very different accounts of the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples.

There are four very different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, and each of them have stories in them that the other three don't. There are *two* different accounts of Jesus' *birth* in Matthew and Luke, while Mark and John don't even *mention* it.

There are two very different accounts of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke; one says, "Blessed are the *poor*," while another says, "Blessed are the poor in *spirit*," "Blessed are those who are *hungry*," and "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*." Which one is it?

The book of Acts shifts right in the middle of it, from speaking in the *third* person ("They did this. *He* did that.") to speaking in the *first* person ("We did this. *I* did that."), and we don't know why it does that.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus sends his disciples out to teach and heal people with the explicit instructions to "go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans." Compare that to *Luke's* gospel, where Jesus *does* lead his disciples into Samaritan towns and among Gentiles. Matthew is a very *Jewish* gospel that speaks of Jesus as the Jewish messiah, while

Luke's gospel speaks of Jesus as the savior of those who are *outside* God's covenant with Israel. So which one is it?

In the Old Testament, the prophets Isaiah and Micah talk about how the Messiah will come to bring peace, and people will beat their swords into plowshares (turning their weapons of war into tools of peace). But the prophet Joel talks about how the people will "beat their plowshares into swords" (Joel 3:10) and prepare for *war*. Which one is it?

Paul writes about how salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; not through our own *actions* or anything that we do to *earn* or *deserve* the love and blessing of God, but by simply *believing* and *trusting* in God through Jesus Christ. But James writes, "What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" Paul would say yes, but James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Which one is it?

The Bible does not speak with one voice. It speaks with *many* voices that reflect the varied backgrounds and worldviews of the writers. It was still *inspired* by *God*. These weren't just people saying whatever they wanted to say to convince people. These were faithful people who were offering their testimony to how they saw God at work among them. And people inevitably have different understandings of that, depending on how they experience the world. The books written by exiled slaves who had been taken prisoner by Babylon are going to reflect different understandings of God and faith than the books written by King David and King Solomon from their palaces at the height of Israel's power.

The thing is, when they were deciding which books would go into the Bible, they *knew* this. They *knew* that some of these voices differed from one another and even seemed to *contradict*

each other. But they included them anyway. They didn't try to smooth them all out and make them harmonize with one another. They *allowed* scripture to speak with a plurality of voices, because they *trusted* that the Holy Spirit would help us *hear* and *understand* the voice of God in all of it.

This understanding of the Bible matches our experience of the world, because *we* speak with a plurality of voices. All we have to do is look around our church, and we will see people whose native languages are English, Spanish, Korean, and Farsi. And that's only *magnified* when you look at the community, the country, and the world around us. We encounter so many different languages on a daily basis. And sometimes that makes it very hard to *understand* one another.

But even *beyond* the *languages* that we speak, there is a plurality of voices at work among us. Because we look around us, and we see *men* and *women* who have different backgrounds and experiences and ways of processing and understanding the world. We see people who are white, black, Asian, Latino, Native American, Jewish, Arabic, Indian, all of whom have different ways of experiencing and understanding the world. We see people who are liberal and conservative and many other points along that spectrum, all of whom have different ways of experiencing and understanding the world. Age, sexuality, socio-economic status, all of it effects the way in which we experience and understand the world. We speak with differing voices that reflect the differing backgrounds, beliefs, worldviews, and experiences that we have. Sometimes it seems like we are speaking totally different languages, and it can be *very hard* to understand each other.

But, this is God's *intention* for creation. We heard in Genesis how "the whole earth had one language and the same words." They start building this tower that will reach the heavens and make a name for themselves. God sees this and says, "They are one people, and they all have the

same language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do.” So God gave them different languages and scattered them across the face of the earth. God made them *diverse* in an attempt to *humble* them. Because working and living together would no longer be easy. It would take *work* to understand each other.

Instead of viewing the plurality of voices and beliefs and worldviews around us as a *problem*, what if we were able to view it as *God’s intention for creation*; God challenging us to *listen* to one another and *understand* one another and find ways to *work together* in the midst of our differences? What if we actually *need* all of these differing voices and backgrounds and experiences and worldviews and the ideas that they bring to help us hear what we can’t hear and see what we can’t see on our own? What if *you* can help *me* understand the world and life and faith and God in a way that I can’t understand on my own? What if we just need someone to *help us* understand each other?

Paul was writing to the Corinthians about speaking in tongues. This was apparently a significant issue in the church in Corinth; some people were speaking in tongues, others weren’t, and there was a *division* growing between them. And what Paul essentially says to them is, “If you can speak in tongues, what does it matter unless someone can *understand* you? If I don’t know the *meaning* of a sound,” he says, “I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker will be a foreigner to me.” And the whole point of the church is that we are not foreigners to one another. It’s to *know* one another, to *share life together* with one another, to overcome the barriers and divisions that the world tries to impose on us and be *one* in Christ. “Therefore,” Paul says, “one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.” He is saying that we should pray for the Holy Spirit to help us understand one another; to overcome all the barriers between us so that we can be one in Christ, even with our differences.

So maybe I don't need to make this person who is *different* from me change to be *like* me. This person who speaks a different language or has a different background or worldview or skin color or political beliefs or religious beliefs. Maybe I need to pray for God to help *me* understand them where *they* are. Maybe, if you're *white*, there is something you can learn about life and faith from someone who is black or Asian or Latino or Arabic. Maybe, if you're a Christian, there is something you can learn about faith from someone who is Jewish or Muslim. Maybe, if you're liberal, there is something you can learn about life and faith from someone who is conservative, and vice versa. Maybe, if you're young, there is something you can learn about life and faith from someone who is old, and vice versa.

We can't just shut ourselves off from each other so that we are only talking and listening to people who speak the same language and hold the same worldview and beliefs that we do. Maybe in listening to all these differing voices, we might begin to hear God's voice in the midst of all of that, just like we do in scripture.

It is God's intention for us to be *different*, but it is *also* God's intention for us to be *one*. To find a way to *listen* to one another and *know* each other and *love* each other. Sometimes we need help doing that, so God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us *understand* each other. Now more than ever in our country and our world and in the church, we *need* that help. We need to pray for the Spirit of God to help us understand each other in all our differences. Because when we do *that*, there may be a *new* Pentecost among us – not just of our *tongues*, but of our *hearts*.