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*Pentecost Sunday*

## **“The Medium is the Message?”**

Acts 2:1-21

Sometimes I write my sermons in crayon. And you know, it shouldn't matter – I'm writing the same words, aren't I, whether I'm typing or using a pen or using my nice wax pastels that don't break when you color too hard – but it does sometimes make the difference for me between staring at a blinking cursor on a blank page, and letting my imagination flow. Typing feels so final, like I have to choose every word perfectly, like the sermon should just emerge fully-formed, from the beginning straight through to the end, with no stopping or tangents or revisions. But with a colored pencil in my hand, on the brown paper of my notebook, the pressure is off somehow, and I can just write the words I've been thinking. Then later on I'll retype them into my Google doc, and then I can revise as I go, rearranging sentences when they don't fit quite right, adding a line or two when the rhythm doesn't quite fit.

The end product is the same, the words are the same, the message is the same. But for me, the medium in which I write those words is often the key to getting to those words in the first place. The language of color on paper, the smoothness of a pastel versus the broad pale line of a colored pencil versus the precise flow of my favorite pen, the crackle of a good notebook; that's a language that speaks to me. For me, that medium makes a difference, and it helps me get to the message I'm trying to communicate to you.

I'm borrowing that language of medium and message from communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, who in the '60s coined this phrase “the medium is the message” as he began to talk about the ways that television in particular was shaping the way people thought and interacted with the world. For him, the particular content of TV broadcasts or newspaper articles or movies was less important than what that form demanded of a person who interacted with it, and the way those media shape our social patterns and expectations over time.

I'm not sure what he would make of my sermon-writing process, going from sketchbook to notebook to laptop computer, and finally winding up in a document stored on Google's servers which I then pull up on my iPad here in the pulpit.

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So today is Pentecost! It's a joyful holiday for the church, one of the only times we get to pull out the beautiful red vestments, and we celebrate with color and streamers or balloons or bubbles and our gorgeous red flowers! Sometimes we call it the birthday celebration of the church, which is true enough, but it also doesn't quite capture the weirdness of this observance. We know what birthdays are, we've all got one. But usually our birthday parties don't include mysterious divine wind, tongues of fire, and the miraculous ability to speak in other languages!

This is a much stranger kind of observance. The church's birthday was a day when the disciples first began to spread the story of Jesus outside of the small communities around Jerusalem where they had traveled. And that required a little divine intervention, because these folks from the little fishing village of Galilee and the people they'd picked up along the way – how on earth were they going to get people to listen to them, least of all these foreigners who had gathered for the Pentecost festival? And even then, people still thought they were drunk!

But miracles are strange things, almost by definition. And on that particular Pentecost, the miracle of the Holy Spirit's presence with those believers turned social conventions upside down in the service of nothing less than telling the story of God's goodness.

Now I'm *not* saying that the miracle was people suddenly knowing languages they didn't know before. The real miracle was being able to communicate the good news to people who needed to hear it.

They didn't speak in Spanish or German or Italian or English, because that wouldn't have helped them in that place and that time. No, these believers spoke in Aramaic and Koine and Armenian, Persian, Parthian, Akkadian, Median, Sumerian and Babylonian and Assyrian; because those were the languages that spoke to the people who had gathered. Most of those languages are dead now, and the others have evolved so far that they would sound to modern speakers of Farsi or Greek the way Chaucer and Shakespeare sound to our ears.

I would love it if we could have readings in biblical Hebrew and Greek and Aramaic, because that feels obscure and nerdy and fun, but I think that would miss the point. The particular languages aren't what matter in this case. What matters is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is *communicated in a way that the listeners understand*. If there had been a child there that day who would speak only in Pig Latin, I am pretty sure that one of those disciples would still have said "Od-gay oves-lay ou-yay," and meant it.

The words they used – the words *we* use – are not the point. The point is the capital-W Word; the message, the good news that God the Creator loves us flawed people for exactly who we are, and every day gives us the grace to do better. And whatever language we need to hear it in, that good news does not change. For that we can give thanks.

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So if the languages don't matter, what is it that we're celebrating today, exactly?

Well, maybe the individual languages aren't important, but when we take them all together, the very fact that God's good works are spoken in every language we can possibly think of, past, present, and future – that starts to mean something big. That means that the story of God's love and Jesus' presence on earth and the work of the Spirit in our lives, that story is told for each and every one of us exactly where we are in words we'll understand. Whether that's a perfect literary or biblical reference, or a story taken from *Orange Is the New Black* season 2 or an inspirational D-Day memory, or it's a note scrawled in crayon on the back of a bulletin, this message is for you and this message is for all people.

And in that way, Marshall McLuhan's aphorism holds true – each particular language is not the message or the gospel, but when we take a step back and see the 2,798 languages into which parts of the Bible have been translated, *that* medium of whatever language it is that we need to hear is the message. The good news is for us, and the good news is for all people, whoever they are and wherever they are, whether the language of their heart is Spanish or Creole or Tagalog or Mandarin or English or one of the thousands of languages that have been wiped out by colonialism or genocide or just the passage of time.

And that's just counting distinct languages! How many varieties of English do we speak, even just in Newark and Elkton? There's urban and rural and suburban distinctiveness, mostly-Black and mostly-White and Spanish-accented and more, there's teenage and young adult and middle-aged and older folks' dialects, there's the language of church and the language of spiritual-but-not-religious, and even within "church" we've got mainline Protestant and evangelical and pentecostal and Catholic and Black-church ways of speaking; and we know which varieties speak to us and which just turn us off and feel like "not our language."

For some of us it's meaningful when a pastor stands up here and raises her hands and says "The grace of Jesus Christ be with you," and we hopefully feel something and we might say "And also with you," or just "amen." But for plenty of other people, that's not quite so familiar. What do you mean, grace? Why are you talking to me about Jesus?

It's a very different world in this place and time than it was on that birth day of the Christian church in the city of Jerusalem – we've got food from all over the world in our markets, we've been to the moon and back, and you can sit on your front porch and research ancient languages from your telephone!

But our challenge is still the same: to speak the good news in a way that those around us will understand. And that might mean trying to separate what is the capital-W Word of God from what are the words we've gotten used to when we're talking about God.

We don't have to learn Akkadian or Sumerian or Coptic, but we do need to learn the language of the people we're trying to speak to, whatever dialects that might be. Thanks be to God, we still have the presence of the Holy Spirit with us to help us do that.

I want to end with some Pentecost words\* from the writer Monica Coleman:

when we put the gospel  
to hip hop  
and host u2charists,  
when we share the church building  
with the Korean congregation,  
when we preach against homophobia  
when we break bread  
with jews and muslims,  
when the teenagers lead worship

on a regular Sunday (not just youth day)  
when we invoke the ancestors  
and learn from their lives,  
when we live at the borders  
offering water to those in the desert  
harbor to those in danger  
and community when we don't fit in. . .  
it is then that we speak in tongues

\*Read more:

<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/How-the-Holy-Spirit-Moves-Today.html#ixzz343QPAPgE>