

EKKLESIA 2-A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS 2:1-15
AUGUST 19, 2018

Lost in translation. Have you ever heard that phrase? Something happens when we switch from one language to another. Because of pronunciation problems, interpretation problems and problems of cultural relevance the message can get lost in translation. A message that was worked on, invested in and practiced can be completely lost in translation to another language. No one knows this better than advertisers. Advertising departments for large global brands have run into this barrier time and again with hilarious results.

Supposedly when KFC began to expand into China, they worked hard to share their message. If you remember, KFC's slogan is, "KFC-finger-lickin' good." When this phrase was rendered in Chinese, it came out, "KFC-eat your fingers off." When Pepsi was expanding in the 1960's, they began to expand into China, their message was, "Come Alive. You are the Pepsi Generation." This slogan got lost in translation when it was understood to say, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back to life." Another story states that Coca Cola was simply transliterated phonetically by Chinese shopkeepers but, the words ko-ke-ko-la meant, "bite the wax tadpole."

In all of these episodes, one thing becomes clear. Language can be a barrier to receiving the message. Sometimes the message can get lost in translation. This problem isn't new. It started back in Genesis 11. After Adam and Eve, and after Noah, but before Moses, we read a story about the tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:1-9

In this story, we see the main sin of humanity as it dates back to the Garden of Eden. Genesis 11:4 tells us that the people were seeking to make a name for themselves. In the same way, Adam and Eve in the Garden took a bite of the forbidden fruit because they were enticed to

become equal with God. In the same way, these people in Babel were literally and figuratively building towards heaven. They were seeking to build the way back to God, and God scattered and confused them. Not simply to quash their architectural endeavors but as a reminder that you cannot build your way back to God. It was a physical picture of a spiritual reality. Mankind in his pride, was scattered and divided. Because sin had entered the world, mankind was scattered and divided from one another and separated from God with no avenue to build their way back.

From that moment onward, God's message was often lost in translation. Because of pride, because of sin, because people were unwittingly trying to build their way back to his presence, because of all of these things, God's message was lost in translation. That brings us to our story today in Acts 2. Sin had corrupted the world, divided mankind and mangled the message. Our passage today follows up where we left off last week. Jesus had risen from the dead, and walked with his disciples for 40 days explaining the Kingdom of God and giving them an audacious mission. Make disciples of all nations. As we talked about last week, the entire book of Acts has several themes, but two major themes are the barriers the church faces and the work of the Holy Spirit to power the church through everything that stands in its way. Our passage today presents another new barrier, language and culture. We see the introduction of the Holy Spirit who will bust through this barrier and widen the scope of who can be reached by this gospel message.

If you are new or this is your first time with us in a while, we started my final series here at SFC looking at the book of Acts last week. We are calling this series, *Ekklesia* because the Holy Spirit is going to shape and power the church to overcome long odds to take the good news of the Kingdom of God to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. *Ekklesia* means called-out. So we are examining what it means to be called-out with the added theme that a big part of being called-out is displacement. If you are called-out, it means you are leaving certain comforts and realities behind, and that is where God often grows the church most prolifically.

We feel this is an important series because it can serve as a guide for what kind of church we want to be at SFC. When we discuss what kind of church we want to be, we are really discussing what kind of disciples we want to make at this church. This is an important discussion because as I told you last week, it is very easy to get off course as a church. It is easy to begin to concern ourselves merely with programs and preferences and completely miss the purpose of our calling and mission as the people of God.

When we first moved here, Casey and I lived in Santa Cruz for eight months, so I would drive by Lexington Reservoir on Highway 17. As the story goes, two communities named Lexington and Alma used to be where this massive reservoir now sits. These communities thrived during the 1800s but became smaller during the 20th century. In the 1950s, people sacrificed and moved out of Lexington and Alma for the greater good of other people, so it could be turned into a reservoir. So that water could go out to a thirsty and growing community of Los Gatos, these people sacrificed for the greater good and moved out. Over 60 years later, the reservoir still provides for a thirsty community, but it also has become a place of recreation where you can pay to ride your bike and hike. It also has become popular real estate as people want to live close to the scenic views on this body of water. Here is the interesting thing. I read several articles about the water district trying to improve their capacity to quench the needs of a thirsty community, but over the years, they have been fought tooth and nail because it might obstruct some views or limit people's entertainment on the reservoir.

In a very similar way, the church was originally constructed to quench the thirst of a parched world. As the years have elapsed, it has become very easy for church to become a comfortable place for entertainment that has nothing do with its original purpose, giving living water to those in need. Because of this, it is important that we come back to books like Acts to remind ourselves of the mission of God. How we are to be disciples and make disciples and give as many people as possible a drink from the well that will allow them to never thirst again?

Acts 2:1-12

Let me fill in some of the details of this passage today. Verse 1 and verse 5 set the place and the context for this episode. This takes place at the Feast of Pentecost which was to be 50 days after the Sabbath of Passover. This is 50 days after the resurrection but before Pentecost had its Christian meaning for us, it was a meaningful Jewish festival. Pentecost, sometimes called the feast of weeks, was celebrated to honor the harvest, the first fruits. This was one of three major religious celebrations that every Jew was expected to return to Jerusalem for. That detail is important because Jews had spread all over the world and were no longer simply living in Israel. A big reason this happened was because of the Babylonian exile. We have discussed this before, but some 600 years before the lifetime of Jesus, the people of God were conquered and scattered. They were disobedient to God and were separated from God and from one another in an act of judgment. In a moment, not unlike the Tower of Babel, God's people were scattered, separated and confused.

These Jews were returning from all over the world to celebrate the harvest and worship God for his provision of the first fruits. Many of them had lived in different parts of the world for several generations, so they spoke different languages. They were the perfect picture of that Babel moment, people who had been scattered because of disobedience and who spoke different languages because of disobedience. Like the people of Babel, the Jews had become guilty of the same sin. They had built something to make their way back to God, not a tower but a religion. A religion of rules and subsets of rules. A series of dates to keep and regulations to enforce. All in an attempt to work back into the good graces of God.

Against that setting, verse 2 says the Holy Spirit descended upon those who believed. It was an auditory and visual show as God's spirit descended upon his people and filled them. Up until this point, the Spirit is mentioned in the Old Testament, but in the Old Testament, the Spirit would come and go. A person would be spirit-filled, but then it could subside. A person could have the Spirit of God in them, but it could be lost because of sin. This is different, this is a filling

in the Holy Spirit or a baptism as Jesus called it. The Holy Spirit was not coming for an afternoon visit but rather to take up residence in those who professed faith.

The images are interesting in this passage. It says there was a sound like a rushing wind and tongues of fire. I believe all of this happened in the presence of other believers who would know and appreciate the meaning. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit, and God was making sure they knew this was it. The wind sound makes sense. The Hebrew word for spirit could also be understood to be "wind." This was an auditory signal that the Holy Spirit was showing up. On top of that, there is this bizarre image of tongues of fire. While there is not an exact corollary in the Old Testament that explains this image, my mind went immediately to Isaiah 6. Isaiah has this humbling moment when he recognizes the holiness of God. He proclaims he is a man of unclean lips. Then an angel touches his mouth with a hot coal. After this God asks, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" This moment has the dual purpose of cleansing Isaiah and also preparing him to speak truth in ways he never has before. The same will be true for these 120 followers. They will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and prepared to speak truth in a new way.

In verses 4-11, they speak in tongues. This is a hot button theological issue. Paul goes to great lengths to discuss the practice of speaking in tongues, which for his purposes is speaking/praying in a heavenly language. It is a means of worship. THIS IS NOT THAT. This passage exactly explains what is going on. These disciples, who are Galileans, speak Aramaic, some Hebrew and maybe some Greek, but they most definitely did not speak all of the languages represented in verses 9-11. God is busting through the barrier of speech for very practical purposes. He is getting the attention of all of these diaspora Jews. The passage says they were speaking the wonders of God in other tongues, and they were drawn to it.

Have you ever been in lost in a foreign country? Do you know how sweet it is when you hear someone speaking English? You end up gravitating to them. Even if you don't know them, it is a familiar voice. These people from all over the world have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, but they don't live there, so they don't know a soul and there is a sea of people.

Josephus, a noted Jewish historian, said that during times like this of an important feast like Passover or Pentecost, the population of Jerusalem would swell to three million people with all of the visitors and pilgrims. These people start to close in on this group because they are wondering, "How do you speak our language? You have an accent from Galilee, but you know a language from the far reaches of the empire."

One of the most important speeches in human history is about to take place, and God breaks through the barrier of language in this story today. There is no room for this message to get lost in translation. Peter is going to preach in front of thousands of people and claim that the crucified man from Nazareth was indeed the long-awaited Messiah, so he gets all of their attention by speaking their language.

I want you to see the miracle going on today. Or perhaps I want to make sure you are seeing the larger miracle here. Yes, there is something miraculous here in that God is supernaturally allowing all of these people to understand in their own language, but it is to get their attention to hear the sermon Peter is about to proclaim. A sermon about the Messiah and a sermon about reconciliation. This whole episode allows us to see God fixing what was broken at Babel.

You see at Babel, man was trying to build his way back to God. God scattered his people and confused their language as a result of their sin. In this episode today, God is speaking the language of all men, not only so they can hear the message, but as a clear message, God has come down to you. God is reaching down to you. In fact, he took on human flesh. God refused to lower his standards regarding sin. Instead he chose to lower himself. Jesus took on human flesh and walked among us. For those who put their faith in him, we no longer have to build and strive to make our way back. God came to us. He spoke our language. He made a way so we are no longer scattered from him or separated from one another. This whole episode is not simply a polyglottal miracle to be appreciated. It is a divine picture of God reconciling humanity to himself. God came down to us. God speaks our language.

The ekklesia must speak the language of reconciliation.

The good news of great joy for many people in Silicon Valley can be found in the subtext of this passage. The word is done. We were scattered and separated at Babel. We were united and reconciled at Pentecost, and we serve a God who came down to us and who speaks our language. This is the divine story of reconciliation. We need to speak the language of reconciliation. The problem is, as a church, it is easy to speak in other tongues. Sometimes we choose to speak language of works. Although we might not say it overtly, we can easily make following Jesus about building a mini tower of Babel in order to please him. With certain feats of morality and good deeds, we can build our way back to God. When our discussion about faith is layered in to dos and musts, we can quickly speak the language of works.

My wife and I were enjoying a few moments of calm after the storm of putting the children to bed the other night. We flipped by one of those reality dating shows, and the man and the woman were sitting on the couch after a first introduction. She told him that she had a list of 50 things that she required in a man and he met 25 of the requirements. I watched in awe as she spoke these words, and this man's eyes gently glazed over and he checked out of the conversation. I'm pretty sure she was voted off that night. A checklist for love is a contradiction in terms. Our God requires nothing but surrender for a relationship. All the to-do's come naturally when our affections change our hearts and are trained on him. It is easy to forget this. Love changes our wants. Love fills up our to-do list. Love creates check lists in our hearts. When we received the truth of reconciliation, we were motivated to do for God as a loving response to his grace. We can start with the "to-do" list. Unchanged hearts don't understand how obedience arises from repentance. God's kindness leads to repentance, and he begins to change our heart and our affections, but to start with the to-do list, will get lost in translation.

Sometimes we speak the language of judgment. As a follower of Jesus, it is easy to become discouraged by the state of the world, and we can quickly become exasperated with people and speak words of judgment and law. Interestingly enough, Jewish tradition holds that the original

giving of the law happened at Pentecost on the day in the desert with Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. There is great symmetry in God's story that the way of grace and love is now being given on Pentecost over a millennium later. While we are to speak truth as followers of Jesus, we cannot forget that we are to speak the truth in love. No one can be guilted or shamed into a thriving relationship with God.

I told you before how I heard a radio ad for a dating service, and their ad said, "Do you want to live the rest of your life alone?" In that moment, the impetus for entering into a relationship is based on fear rather than love. The divine relationship should not be built upon anything but the warming of the heart towards God not as a byproduct of fear or guilt.

The interesting part of this story happens in verses 13-15. Not everyone hears this message. As crystal clear as it is, some people are not willing or ready to hear the message of reconciliation. When it comes to speaking the language of reconciliation, we are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful. We are to proclaim the reconciliation of God through the resurrection. You can't dress it up or dress it down. You can't make it about works, and you can't make it about judgment. It is about a loving God who spoke the language of a crucified messiah who rose on the third day. A condescending God who took on flesh to come down to us and speak our language. Our natural inclination is towards tower building or wallowing in the wreckage, but God offers a way back. God speaks our language.

Here is where the displacement comes in. After being a Christian for a while, we can start to think it is about our works and our righteousness. This passage reminds us that we were called-out because of grace which led us to good works. We cannot impose our convictions upon others. They have to be called-out by grace and discover good works. We can never speak of God in terms of ought to and should. That just means we are constructing our own towers of Babel. We are to speak grace and reconciliation. In short, we are to speak the language of God.

I saw another story of a marketing ad that got lost in translation. HSBC Bank out of New York ran an ad campaign focused upon the idea of “assume nothing.” They were trying to explain how they were unconventional in that they were not beholden to traditional banking practices and they “assumed nothing.” The problem was this ad campaign went international and the phrase was translated to, “do nothing.” You can imagine it. “Welcome to HSBC. We aren’t like other banks. Trust us with your money, and we will do nothing.” It didn’t go over so well.

As I thought about it, I realized this was the perfect ad campaign for those who don’t know God especially in Silicon Valley. The land of countless Babel towers. The land of can-do and to-do lists. We want to speak the language of reconciliation at SFC and people to do nothing. That there is nothing they can do. There is no way for them to work their way back. They were scattered and separated from birth, but through Jesus, God is bringing all things back together. There will be time for obedience and action after you turn to God, but all you can do for yourself at the moment is “do nothing.” Even if you do something, it amounts to nothing. The free gift of God requires nothing of you because you have nothing to give. All you must do is accept that God did for you what you could not do for yourself. That he reconciles and restores those who put their faith in Jesus. That is the gospel. That is the good news. Hopefully it doesn’t get any clearer than that. Speak the language of reconciliation this week and don’t let the gospel get lost in the translation.