

In Our Own Language

Prayer

In 1969, my parents took a once in a lifetime trip to Switzerland with their best friends. That summer, I was the assistant director at Camp Laurel, a Girl Scout camp in Lebanon, CT. About midway through their time away, on a Tuesday morning, I got one of those nightmare phone calls from my older brother. "Mom called. Dad has had serious heart trouble and is in hospital in Geneva. Their friends have to come home. Can you go to Switzerland to be with Mom?"

Welllllllllll. Yes. I guess.

Friends drove me to New York - remember this was lightyears before 9/11. Someone on the national staff of the Girl Scouts told me what documents to bring, and where to go in New York for a passport and tickets. I left Norwich, CT that Tuesday afternoon, had passport in hand by Wednesday, midafternoon, was on a transatlantic flight headed for Geneva by 9 pm Wednesday evening and landed in Geneva Thursday morning.

Fortunately, Dad had had a small heart attack, but when they were doing more tests, they also discovered that he was living with an aortic aneurysm. He needed to stay in hospital 6 weeks, recover from the heart attack, then fly home for surgery. Short version is that it all worked well. But Mom and I had some serious spare time.

So one day we drove to the base of Chamonix Mont Blanc and did the tourist thing, riding a cable car to the top. It was a big car, with maybe 30 people in it. Suddenly in the muddle of Italian, German, French, and other languages which I could not identify, I heard it. Then I heard it again. I said to Mom, "someone in this car is speaking English." We began staring at people like we were birdwatchers trying to identify fall warblers.

The car stopped - we got off first and stood on the loading dock waiting for everyone to disembark. There! We heard it again! - we stepped over to meet them. "Excuse us, but we heard someone speaking English. Where are you from." Well, to make a wonderful miraculous story short, they were folks from a neighboring town in western Mass. We lived about 10miles apart.

We were strangers in another country, and all of a sudden we heard them speaking in our own language. I will let you just imagine the joy that we felt! The whole world seemed to shrink to a manageable size in those few moments. Looking back on it now, it really was a genuine Pentecost moment. And there was more good news in our story that I'll save for another time.

Acts 2:1-12 (The Message)

2 1-4 When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

5-11 There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues? (In our own languages)

*Parthians, Medes, and Elamites;
Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;
Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;*

Even Cretans and Arabs!

“They’re speaking our languages, describing God’s mighty works!”

12 Their heads were spinning; they couldn’t make heads or tails of any of it.

We all speak several languages. How many among us are parents? Plop an infant child into our laps and every one of us, will instantly began cooing and gurgling like a besotted young father holding his first newborn in his arms for the first time. We are all fluent in baby talk.

Any number of us work in professions where English is spoken, but the profession-specific jargon renders the language unintelligible to anyone on the “outside.” It is indeed another language.

The same is true of church. There is significant insider - outsider reality in church talk, and Bible speak. If I talk to you about King Jimmy’s English, most folks who are over 45-50 know immediately that I am speaking of the so-called authorized version of the Scriptures, the King James Version.

Two very significant writers have sold thousands of books regarding this insider-outsider church language reality. One, Kathleen Norris, wrote a book called “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith.” Here is part of blurb from Amazon.com promo for her book. *Struggling with her return to the Christian church after many years away, Kathleen Norris found it was the language of Christianity that most distanced her from faith. Words like “judgment,” “faith,” “dogma,” “salvation,” “sinner”—even “Christ”—formed what she called her “scary vocabulary,” words that had become so codified or abstract that their meanings were all but impenetrable. That was in 1999.*

Another writer, Professor Marcus Borg (among my favorite writers - so good that I recommend reading everything he is writing) who in 2011, wrote “Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power, and How They Can Be Restored.” This from the Amazon

promo. Borg cracks open the encrusted words of faith and pops them into fresh language that people can understand and trust.

Friends, we the church, have something to offer the world around us, something folks want and need, a message that changes people and lives and communities for the better. We have a message that makes a difference. We do not have a widget, we do not have “a better mousetrap,” or any other tangible object. To use yet another language, “business speak” our “product” is a message. We need to deliver that message in language that folks can understand, and we need to deliver that message via media that folks will use to receive it.

The first rule of any written or spoken communication is “know your audience.” On that first birthday of the church, Peter stood up, and immediately began to speak the language of the common culture of the people who were there. “Fellow Jews” he said. He spoke of the prophets - and they knew all about the prophets. He spoke of David and they knew all about David. Peter knew his audience.

Friends, can we agree that our “product” is a message?
Can we agree that our message, simply put, is something like this?
“God is love.”
“Life is about love and loving.”
“Life lived in love and loving is good, very, very good.”

First Church does a great job of proclaiming the message in lived languages, by that I mean the language of what we do, the language of walking the walk. For example we speak fluently - in the language of teaching our kids. Good people work with the work camp, with the youth groups and the Sunday School classes. First Church does a great job proclaiming that message in the language of helping folks in need, through the food pantry and interfaith ministries and the work camp and the pastor’s discretionary fund. First Church does a great job of proclaiming that message in the language of friendship, through the fellowship of the golf tournament and WEB and the choir and all the events that happen around here. And let me acknowledge that if we

have to choose between walking the walk, and talking the talk, I believe that walking the walk is far more valuable in lots of ways. However, we cannot choose.

We can and must improve our proclamation and widen our audience.

This will mean, using the social media. We are already in the process of updating our attractive and well built website. Last week's sermon is already there, the calendar is coming, and now we are going to be able to count the number of visitors. Websites do however, have one major limitation - people have to want to go there, they have to go looking for us.

Facebook is another story. Facebook is everywhere. Do you realize that over a billion people are on facebook? Facebook and similar sites are the media which will allow us to reach a much wider audience, and actually have conversation. Facebook now creates a common culture in the world around us where we can converse with people about of God's love and people will hear "in their own language" just as people heard the mighty works of God "in their own language" as they were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost.

Friends, we are here because we have heard, we are listening to the message of God's love, in our own language. We stay here, because God is still speaking, still whispering "I love you" in ways that we hear, see, and taste. Let's together figure out new ways to share that love in the world around us, including the social media, that reaches thousands of our friends and neighbors.

This is what I would offer for the week that lies before us - let find new ways to offer God's love, that people may hear in their own language.

Blessings and peace, joy and hope be yours.