



“Spiritual Fluency”

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Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)***

There are many ways to describe what happened on the first Pentecost. Quite possibly my favorite interpretation of the event is that Pentecost was an occasion when people from all over the Roman world gathered in Jerusalem and—though visitors and natives alike spoke many different languages—everyone who was there understood each other. Notice how Luke explains in verses 11 and 12, “...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

The author observes that some bystanders assumed that the apostles were drunk, but Peter offered a different explanation. In verses 13 and following, he says that the events in Jerusalem were the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy—the day when young people gained a vision for their futures and the elders of the nations dreamed dreams again. It was the day that Joel had imagined, when women and men—free people and slaves alike—received the gift of prophecy, and the whole world was offered the gift of God’s salvation on earth and in heaven.

Many progressive Protestants, in my experience, are perplexed by Luke’s account of Pentecost, because it seems far afield from their (from our) experience. It conjures up stories about the supernatural and of persons who espouse theologies of salvation that they (and perhaps we) may not share. So, they (and perhaps we) are inclined to pack a picnic and go to the beach on Pentecost Sunday, rather than plumb one of the great mysteries of scripture that we may not fully comprehend.

I am sympathetic to those who are puzzled or perplexed by the story of Pentecost, because it is a complex and multivalent story, and even biblical scholars continue to debate its historical and theological significance. Yet, I have come to not only appreciate but love this story, because it reminds me (and all of us) of what God has done and continues to do in our world, when people of diverse cultures come together, open ourselves to the work of the Spirit, embrace God’s vision of a just and peace-filled world, and when we do our respective parts to fulfill that vision.

II

The choral scripture reading that was shared this morning is one of several ways that we are celebrating and demonstrating that Pentecost was not only an historic event that occurred over 2000 years ago, but—more importantly—that it is an ongoing process which we are called to participate in as members of the household of faith. This is so because, as the choral reading demonstrates, our capacity for language competency as people of faith, and expressing and developing our language competencies are ways that we can celebrate Pentecost every day.

In Acts, Luke explains that everyone at the first Pentecost understood God's mighty deeds of power in "their own languages." This gift of language comprehension was not, it seems, the result of foreigners and natives speaking a common language. But instead, it was the result of everyone gathered there knowing more than one language—perhaps, many languages.

Ponder Luke's point for a moment—everyone gathered in Jerusalem understood the others' language, not because everyone was speaking the King's English or first-century Italian or Hebrew, but because each of the listeners was fluent in a language *other than* the language they spoke at home.

Imagine if Christians around the world today—particularly Christians in the US—took it upon themselves to learn more than one language. Imagine if our language competency was more reflective of modern European cultures than our current US context. This is not impossible to do. Eden Church already has a head start on language competency.

Did you notice how many different people and languages were included in our choral reading this morning? This multi-vocal choral reading was possible because nearly one-fourth of our congregation has some competency in one or more languages other than English. Interestingly, those who are familiar with one other language know at least two or more.

When I sat down to count this week, I realized that there are at least 20 languages known and spoken within our congregation, including the following: Cantonese, Dutch, French, Fukienese (the Chinese dialect spoken in Taiwan), German, Hawaiian, Indonesian, Italian, Javanese, Japanese, Latin, Mandarin, Danish, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, Swahili, Tagalog, and Tongan.

As speakers of other languages know very well, some words, ideas, and experiences simply do not translate well into another language. To comprehend the meaning of a term or a particular event in another language or culture requires language fluency and cultural competence in more than one language and more than one culture.

The number of people in our congregation, for example, who are bilingual or multi-lingual is a true blessing in our increasingly diverse community and nation, not only because this trait speaks of our linguistic fluency, but—as equally important—because this trait speaks of our commitment to spiritual fluency, to discern the work of the Holy Spirit within and among diverse peoples who work for the common good, which is another way of saying, “for the kin-dom of God.”

III

In addition to language fluency, some other ways that we can express spiritual fluency and make Pentecost a year-round celebration are by forging cross-cultural relationships in our community and around the globe.

For some of us, forging cross-cultural relationships literally begins at home, with whom we marry or whom we literally or metaphorically adopt as our family of choice. For others, cross-cultural relationships take shape as we host the neighborhood block party, volunteer at our children’s school, take in an exchange student, participate in a study-abroad program, or forge collegial relationships at work.

Some other cross-cultural relationships that our very own members have been involved with include: Stephanie Spencer’s service on the Hayward–Ghazni Sister City Committee, Susan Dupree’s and Cliff Sherwood’s work with Rotary International, and Herb Graw’s role in founding a cultural exchange program between Cal State East Bay and a university in China.

IV

A further way that we may become culturally and spiritually fluent is by praying with and receiving the hospitality of persons from other cultures. This is sometimes hard work for those of us who come from more privileged backgrounds.

I learned from my colleague, Allan Kelchner, pastor of the Danville Congregational Church, that this past March his congregation sent a delegation to Guatemala to forge a sister-parish relationship with San Antonio Chiul, a Catholic Church in Quiche.¹

One of the requirements of the sponsoring sister-parish organization is that the relationship between partnering congregations is focused on conversation, cross-cultural dialogue, and spiritual practices developed through *long-term* relationships, rather than through *short-term* mission trips in which the relationships end the minute that the airplane wheels are up on the *gringos’* flight back to the US.

My colleague, Allan, shared with me before the partnership trip that he anticipated that the most difficult part of the sister-parish experience for his congregation would be grappling with the systemic aspects of poverty from a spiritual perspective, and striving to discern and work on long-term, systemic change rather than writing checks and

¹ <http://www.sisterparish.org/html/linkages.asp?id=27>

thinking that his congregation had done their part to address the socio-economic privations they encountered in Guatemala.

For those who may not be aware, the Danville Congregational Church was founded by former members of Eden's Diaspora, who moved to Danville in the 1950s. In a recent television newscast, it was reported that Danville is now the most affluent community in the Bay Area. So the work that our friends in Danville are about is challenging spiritual work, but they are committed to it and we commend them for their efforts.

V

Our Pentecost celebration culminates today with the Pilgrim Potluck and Immigration Forum, which will include an invitation from Church Council to study and support the Compañeras/os Ministry Plan that Council has been developing over the past several months, and that we unanimously approved this past Tuesday, to commend to the membership for adoption at our Annual Meeting on June 26, 2011. A copy of the current draft was posted on the church website last Thursday, and paper copies will be available on your lunch tables in Oliver Hall today.

The Compañeras/os Ministry Plan is grounded in Eden's 15-year history of community organizing in Cherryland, and our support of affordable, accessible health care for all, and our more recent work on immigration reform² and youth violence prevention through the design of youth investment programs at Hayward High School.

The Compañeras/os Ministry Plan also proposes some new ventures for us to consider as a congregation, such as an adopt-a-school relationship with Cherryland Elementary School, and the exploration of ways that Eden Church and the Eden Area Foundation may be able to encourage more job training and economic development opportunities in Cherryland, through the leveraging of our personal and organizational relationships and resources.

Through these and other prophecies and dreams, we, as Eden Church, keep the Pentecost party going on. Through the development of our language and cultural competencies, through the forging and nurturing of cross-cultural relationships, through the exchange of hospitality with people from cultures other than our own, and through the discernment of ways that God is calling us to shape and implement the Compañeras/os Ministry Plan, we become modern day prophets and apostles. So it is in that spirit that I invite you to say with me, "Party on!" Amen.

² E.g., CA AB-1081 that affirms local decision making about participation in ICE's "Secure Communities' Strategy," and support of changes in City and County towing policies for undocumented drivers.