

“What Does This Mean?”

Acts 2:1-13

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I would love to be remembered as the minister who was always pushing the question: what does this mean? I have a basic assumption that people come to church in search of meaning, and come most frequently when finding meaning is most urgent. Therefore, when the trustees return from serving the supper at South Park Inn, I like to ask them: what did that mean to you? Or when the deacons serve Communion on a first Sunday of the month, I hope to catch up with one of them to ask: so what did it mean? Or when a Confirmation student wrestles with the Cain and Abel story, I'm right there to push the question: what does this mean?

On the Day of Pentecost recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the twelve apostles found themselves proclaiming the mighty works of God in all the known languages of the world. This was astounding to them and to everyone who happened to be passing by! “How is it,” they asked, “that we each hear in our own native tongue, the mighty deeds of God?” The question is on the tongues of the travelers heading up to Jerusalem with their thank offerings. It's not enough simply to hear the apostles' preaching. They want to know what it all means! What's happening?!

Of course, what's happening is the birth of the church. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the apostles so they can go and do the one thing that mattered: to proclaim God's mighty deeds to anyone who had ears to hear. I can just hear one of them announcing in Russian Language: Christ has risen! I can hear another speaking Portuguese: God has set us free from the oppression of hatred!

I can hear another proclaiming in Spanish: God has opened the door to eternal life! Another preaches in Africa: Mulungu akupatsa moyo kwambiri! God is the giver of abundant life!

What does all this speaking in many languages mean? It means the Spirit has given birth to the church! It means the Spirit is equipping people for a ministry of proclamation! It means that some very good news has been entrusted with some very faithful followers of Jesus Christ, and those followers have been given what they need to spread that good news.

At South Church, we have people who speak the language of children. This is a special language for telling our sacred story such that the youngest among us know for sure they are loved. It's a language that uses gestures more than words, body language more than poetic expression, tenderness more than verbs or nouns or prepositions. I'm sure our children are learning the Bible stories, but mostly I rejoice that they are learning they are loved absolutely. The Spirit has given this special language to a number of you! Because you have this gift for speaking the language of children, the church is born again and again!

At South Church, we have people who speak a difficult jargon; this is the language of teenagers. It is a coded language, evolving quickly, requiring refresher courses every fall. I frequently speak a faux pas for failure to take the refresher course! The language of teenagers is one that leaves plenty of room for listening. In the teen years, our sons and daughters simply want to be heard! Oh, what a profound joy it is to realize some adult has taken the time to hear what is on my mind, what is on my heart, what I dread and what I yearn for. There used to be a dire shortage of teen speakers. Now, there is a plethora of teen speakers, women and men who have learned the vocabulary of listening to the heart. When this language is spoken at Wednesday School or Confirmation class or mission trips, the mighty deeds of God are proclaimed!

The Spirit has given this special language to a number of you!
Because you have this gift for teen-speak, the church is born again
and again!

At South Church, we have people who speak a highly complex language; it is the language of grief, the language we use to minister unto anyone who has suffered a loss of any kind. Our culture struggles with this language, what to say at the funeral home visiting hours, what to say when a friend starts to cry, what to say when the platitudes sound so empty. But there are lots of people here who have learned this awkward language. They say to a recent widow things like: I've made a reservation for two at the restaurant. I'll pick you up at noon. Or they say to a recent widower: I'm stopping by this morning with my mop and a bucket and a box of Spic-n-Span. I'll be mopping your kitchen floor. You make the tea. Or they'll say: I really didn't get to know your mother; would you tell me some of her story? Or they'll say: your son has died in Iraq. What was he like as a toddler? The Spirit has given this special language to a number of you. I know because you have spoken it to me. Because you have this gift for the language of grief talk, the church is born again and again.

The early apostles grasped the meaning of Pentecost right away!
They set out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the known world. They took with them a story, a story of God's mighty deeds. They spoke this story in every language so that the grace of God could be available to people everywhere.

So Pentecost is not a day in history, it is a happening that repeats itself over and over again, wherever the Spirit gifts people with a tongue for speaking the language of love. This is my understanding of the text. I share it with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen!

