

St. John Lutheran Church

The Sermon

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Acts 2:1-21, Psalm 104, Romans 8:14-17

If I want to say, “I like to go to the beach” in Spanish, I will say, “Me gusta ir a la playa.” But if I say, “Me gusta ir a la playa,” I am not exactly saying, “I like to go to the beach,” but rather, “It pleases me to go to the beach.” That’s a little different, because now it’s not so much about me and my attitude toward the beach: “I like. . .” but rather it’s about something else that acts on me. “It pleases me.” Maybe that “It” is the beach, or the universe, or God. But it’s not me.

Languages are not code that directly translates the exact same meaning from one word to another. Languages contain differing ways of looking at the world. If I say, “Potato” in French, I don’t say, “potato.” “Potato” is a rather ordinary sounding, everyday kind of word. “Potato, potato.” If I say “potato” in French, it’s not “potato,” it’s “Pomme de terre,” “apple of the earth.” As usual, French is just a little more elegant, a little more exciting than most other languages.

In the South African language of Zulu, Ubuntu means, a person does not exist without other people. It indicates that we all need to work together, we are community. We do not just think about ourselves.

When we take communion, we sing “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.” The original of that song is in Latin: “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.” It doesn’t just mean Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” It also means, “Lamb of God, who lifts up, takes away and destroys the sins of the world.”

So we are not just asking to be let off the hook for our sins. We are not just asking to be let off the hook for the violence and fixation on the ability to kill that has resulted in three mass shootings in as many weeks. We are not just asking to save our sorry hides from punishment for the myriad addictions we have, to alcohol and drugs and gambling and pornography, and also to illusions of our own cultural or ethnic superiority, or illusions that we are inferior somehow because of our culture or our ethnic heritage, we are not just asking to be let off the hook from being punished for our greed and selfishness, we are asking God to destroy it.”

Lamb of God, please destroy our desire for alcohol, our desire for pornography. Lamb of God, who destroys our illusions of superiority or inferiority, have mercy on us.

There are over seven thousand different languages in the world. Each of them is a new universe of meaning and insight, wisdom and understanding. If you want to explore new worlds, you don't have to go to some Star Trek, science fiction fantasy, just talk to somebody who speaks a different language from you.

This is a beauty and a wonder. But it also a burden and a pain.

For example, even for those of us who speak English, there are differences. If I say the “Diversity, equity and inclusion,” for some of us these words will mean that maybe, just maybe, things will get better for our children. Maybe our daughters will be able to do their jobs without as much harassment and patronizing attitude as we had to suffer. Maybe our sons can walk down the street without fear of being gunned down, or of some stupid person whispering an insult to them, or spitting on them, just enough to be felt but not enough to be seen. Maybe they can live without the constant worry and threat of some idiot choosing to put them down just out of the blue, for no reason.

When some of us hear these words, “diversity, equity and inclusion,” we feel hope.

Others of us might hear these words and feel something quite different. We might feel afraid. We might feel that our history or heritage, or even just our selves and our families will be seen as bad, evil, despicable. We might fear that we will be replaced, somehow, or that the job of making ends meet and putting food on the table will get even harder than it is now.

We might feel fear, resentment and cynicism when we hear these words.

Similarly, the words, “Family values,” for some of us, are comforting words. They remind us of when we were kids, and there was stability and love in our families. Or, perhaps, they remind us of a dream. Maybe things weren’t quite so stable when we were little. Maybe things could have been more loving than they actually turned out to be. So we dream that we or our children will be able to have enough to eat and put a roof over our heads, and an attitude of thankfulness and the ability to work hard, and commitment and love. That’s what those words mean for some of us.

For others of us, however, those words, “family values,” mean precisely the opposite. For such folks among us, these words might mean that God desires community and happiness and stability and commitment and love for you, but not for me. Because of the way I am built by God, because of the way I am, I have no place in a loving family, no place in a caring church, I am excluded, thrown out, despised, loathed, a despicable human being, less than human. Because of who I am, Jesus hates me, and God has destined me to eternal damnation. That’s what those words mean for some of us, “family values.”

We have different languages.

Now, here is some good news. There is a truth beneath our languages. There is a power and a life and a hope and a peace and a love that moves beyond and through all languages. Remember our psalm? Psalm 104. God has made all things. God made even the ocean, the symbol of chaos in Hebrew thinking. God made Leviathan, the great scary sea monster, just to play in the ocean, for the fun of it. God holds even chaos in God’s hands.

All things look to God for their very existence. God opens God’s hands and all the creatures of the earth receive their food in due season. God hides God’s face, and they are dismayed. God takes away their breath, they die and return to their dust. God breathes the Spirit, which is the same word in Hebrew as breath, God breathes out God’s spirit-breath, and renews the face of the earth.

This is the truth of God beneath all languages. That power, that hope, that peace, that truth has name. Its name is Jesus and Jesus loves you.

We have all been created in the image of God at the dawn of time, and we have been restored to the image of God through the cross of Jesus Christ, every day. That means we can speak this peace, the life, this hope, this love, this Jesus, amidst many languages.

In the second chapter of Acts, the apostles are speaking in the languages of Parthians and Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene. All these different languages, they are speaking the hope and peace and power and life of God.

Wouldn't it be great if we could do that nowadays?

Well, we can. Here's how: Two little stories.

First, some of you may know that I am the chair of the Indiana-Kentucky Racial Justice Task Force. That means I help them come together and work for racial justice in and through the ELCA churches in Indiana and Kentucky. I heard this story as part of my work, don't remember from whom. But there was this fellow, African American, driving through the two-lane roads of rural countryside in Georgia, where you will see a lot of kudzu, and a lot of soybeans and a lot of cattle in pasture. He's driving through this countryside, sees a barn up in the distance.

Then his tire blew out. He pulled out his spare. It was flat too. Now he's getting nervous because this was not the sort of area where African American men who were strangers usually feel comfortable. He says to himself, "What do I do, what do I do?"

Before long, a white farmer comes walking up over the hill. He comes up to the car, says, "Looks like you got a flat tire." Guy says, "Yes, I do." He says, "I'll be back in a little bit," walks back up over the hill. About ten minutes later he comes back carrying a tire in one hand, helps him put it on the car. He drives on to where he can get his tire repaired.

That's one story. Here's the other.

I attended seminary at the Lutheran School of theology at Chicago in Hyde Park, on the south side. I was driving one day from the Dan Ryan Freeway on 55th street east toward Hyde Park, and if you know Chicago, you will know this might not be the place where a person like me would necessarily feel the most comfortable breaking

down. Which my car did. Right there in the middle of 55th street. Now there are cars all around me, honking and passing on both sides. I'm going, "what do I do, what do I do?"

This group of young African American folks walking along on the sidewalk come up and say, "Would you like us to help you push your car to the curb?" I said, "Yes, please!" We got it to the curb. Then they said, "Would you like us to call a tow truck.?" I said, "That would be most kind, thank you." So one of them went into a local shop and called a tow truck.

Here's my point. We speak the mighty acts of God, the hope and power and life and love of Jesus Christ, beneath and beyond all languages and all differences, by what we do; by how we treat each other, as individuals, as groups and as nations.

Maya Angelou once said, "People will forget what you say. They will not forget how you made them feel."

The Holy Spirit speaks through what we do.

We figure out what to do by looking at Jesus, as he is presented to us in Scripture.

Jesus is not always quiet and nice in Scripture. Sometimes Jesus confronts. Sometimes Jesus heals. Jesus does not complain about how he doesn't have enough food to feed thousands and thousands of people, so he'd better just take care of his own. No, he gives thanks for what he has, just five loaves and two fish, and he shares what he has, and from there, miracles happen.

We figure out what to do from Jesus as we find him in scripture.

Paul says, "we do not have a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but a spirit of adoption. We are members of God's family. We were created that way, in the image of God at the dawn of time. We are restored to that image of God through the cross of Jesus Christ every day. So we do not have a spirit of slavery either.

Fear will bind your soul. Fear will make you a slave. Instead, we are a people of the cross, a people of hope. So we speak, not out of fear and cynicism and despair, but out of hope. We vote, not based on our fear or cynicism or despair, but hope. We act, not on the basis of fear or cynicism or despair, but hope.

That's how the Holy Spirit speaks through many languages. Thanks be to God.