

Unconverted difference (Acts 2:1-21)

The Spirit affirms our differences, speaking in ways that each of us can understand—yet also drawing us together.

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In 1492, in Salamanca, Spain, Antonio de Nebrija presented to Queen Isabella his latest book. Nebrija wrote the first textbook on the grammar of the Spanish language—a grammar of the vernacular, the ordinary language spoken in markets and in fields, at home and on the streets. No other European country had a textbook for their common language. That would be absurd, a waste of time.

When Nebrija presented his textbook to the queen, she was confused, puzzled. The bishop had to explain the book's significance. "After your Highness has subjected barbarous peoples and nations of varied tongues," he said, "with conquest will come the need for them to accept the laws that the conqueror imposes, among them will be our language."

The bishop's explanation made sense to the queen. She had her mind set on conquest. Of course the Spaniards would need to impose their language on the barbarians in her conquered lands. In Nebrija's grammar book, in the preface, he emphasized the connection between language and colonialism: "I have found one conclusion to be very true, that language always accompanies empire." Language and empire. Colonialism involved imperial control through a common vocabulary, a single tongue. (See Henry Kamen's book *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power*,

1492-1763.)

At Pentecost we see the opposite of what Nebrija and the Queen imagined: a world of many tongues. We see that God affirms the native languages of all the peoples. “The crowd...was bewildered,” says Acts, “because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” For God, there is no imperial tongue. Instead, at Pentecost we see God affirm a diversity of tongues. The Holy Spirit speaks through all languages. Every language is holy.

Pentecost invites us into a new way of engaging with difference—not just with different languages, but with all the ways we are marked as different from one another. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit speaks through the differences, without converting them into sameness. People aren’t invited to give up their languages, their cultures, and convert to the same way of speaking and thinking.

The miracle of Pentecost is that God speaks through all the native languages—not that God speaks in a single language, a universal language, that is then translated. Through the Spirit, difference is made holy. “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”—not some, but all. Not in order to make everyone the same, but to affirm all flesh, to affirm where they came from, to bless who they are, to announce that what makes them different is good and holy. As a voice from heaven tells Peter later in the book of Acts (10:15), “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

The history of the church is filled with stories of people who refuse to listen to strange tongues, Christians who refuse to learn from different ways of being. The story of Nebrija and the queen is one such story. For them, the people in distant lands were barbarians, irrational, in need of a true language and civilized culture—foreigners in need of God’s law.

But Pentecost offers us a different way, where the Spirit affirms our differences, speaking in ways that each of us can understand—and yet drawing us together, around the same table, into communion. That’s how the day of Pentecost ends, with all these strangers eating together. “So those who welcomed [the] message were baptized, [and] they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer” (2:41-42); “they broke bread from home to home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (2:46).

The miracle of communication that happened on Pentecost birthed a miracle of communion. To commune is to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and hope for the

miracle of knowing God in a meal, in each other. Communion is an invitation to come together around a table and to let Jesus stretch us into relationships with one another, with people who are the same and different, as we struggle to understand God, as we struggle to understand each other.