

“In Our Own Tongues”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
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Something incredible happened that day on Pentecost. Something absolutely incredible. You see, up until this point in the Christian Scriptures, everyone was convinced that *what God wanted* was to scatter the people to the four corners of the Earth, to keep them out of trouble. You probably remember what happens early in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Genesis, chapter 11, the whole world is said to have had a single common speech. Yahweh discovers them building a tower into the heavens so they can make a name for themselves. Yahweh says in Genesis chapter 6, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do *this*, then *nothing* they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

Christianity is not the only religion to explain that it was GOD who separated the people. A Hindu myth tells of how not only differences in language, but also diversity in culture and customs came into being, when Brahma cast punishment upon a proud tree.¹ The story goes like this:

There grew in the centre of the earth the wonderful ‘world tree,’ or ‘knowledge tree.’ It was so tall that it reached almost to heaven. [The Tree] said in its heart, ‘I shall hold my head in heaven and spread my branches over all the earth, and gather all men together under my shadow, and protect them, and prevent them from separating.’

But Brahma, to punish the pride of the tree, cut off its branches and cast them down on the earth, when they sprang up as wata trees, [they] made differences of belief and speech and customs prevail on the earth, and dispersed men all over its surface.

There are creation stories across the globe with similar themes. Whether or not humanity once had a common language, these stories across many cultures explain something that resonates with our experience. Something we know. Something that *is*.

We are divided in this world. We are divided in this country, in this state, in this city, in this church. We have different experiences in our family, different understandings of how we have come to be who we are, different meanings that we make about what our purpose in life is. No single person can completely understand what it means to *be* someone else. We cannot occupy their history, their experience, their place in space and time. Yet, there is something very beautiful in our diversity. Like the many facets of a carefully cut diamond, we all reflect the light in our very own way.

The interesting thing about the Abrahamic faith traditions of GOD separating us is, that the story does not end with the tower of Babel. This morning I want to suggest to you that the tower of Babel is just one of three stories closely woven together: Babel, Moses & the Commandments, and Pentecost. First, GOD separates us as a people because we are full of pride. And we learned to remain separated by joining with those who were *like us* and resisting those who are not. And from our separation came wars and –isms, racism, sexism, terrorism. All this was actually our pride taking over once again.

We remained divided interpersonally as well. With language and culture came writing and education. Our experience of the world began to be recorded – made permanent instead of fluid. And we began, at least in Western Culture's history, to hierarchically judge our experience of the world, placing what could be classified and catalogued above experiences of heart, and spirit, and intuition.

However, in the Christian Scriptures, in Acts 2, something happens. The story changes. The Jewish Festival Day of Shavuot (which was celebrated long before Jesus came along) is the day commemorating GOD giving Moses the Ten Commandments. Now everyone hearing this story in Acts, at the time, would know this, and on that day, something very strange happens to a group of Jesus' followers. Something happens that most Unitarians probably for the most part have dismissed. (I'm sure Jefferson didn't keep this part in.) *Pente* means 50, and 50 days after Easter - on *Pentecost* – GOD, evidently, changes her mind.

On Pentecost, people from all over are gathered together with a large group of Galileans, and the wind begins to blow. (Now in biblical language, if the wind starts blowing, it means you had better wake up, because something very important is about to happen.) So the wind begins to blow, and the people see what seem to be tongues of fire that separate and come to rest on each of Jesus' followers. (I like to imagine them coming down directly to their hearts.) And the Galileans begin to speak.

I'm sure, since they were practical people, the first thing they were telling one another was that they were on fire! The passers by in the street heard a cacophony of gibberish. But the people in the room heard their own language coming from the Galileans. They heard a message that resonated with their experience. GOD must have decided that even in our difference, with some help, we could in fact understand each other. It was a miracle. People with very different backgrounds, with different cultures, and different understandings were all under the same roof declaring the wonders of GOD in their own tongues. Everyone understood.

Now there *were* some skeptics, mind you. Not everyone was buying into this miracle.

Someone in the room (likely a Unitarian) exclaimed, “They have had too much wine!” But Peter set them straight: it was only 9 in the morning. The wine wasn’t even out yet.

So what do we take away from this story? GOD separates us in Genesis, and then, by miracle of miracles, we have an opportunity to be together in the same room, speaking in our own tongues, about the wonder of GOD and we are understood! This act, in Acts, has been mimicked and practiced by Pentecostals all over the world as a form of prayer and worship. Pentecostals report that they feel their hearts open up in what they would call a baptism of the Holy Spirit as they allow their voices, not confined by their own language, to become a tool of praise.

Pentecostalism is the fastest growing religion in the United States and the world today. And I am sure we have all been touched by it in some way. How many of you have been in the room when someone has spoken in tongues? Or been to Azusa? Azusa is a conference, founded by African American preacher William J. Seymour, that began in the early 1900s in Los Angeles, and really modernized Pentecostalism in America. Witnessing someone speak in tongues can be moving. It can be frightening. Those speaking *can* appear out of their minds, which in some sense they are, and they can appear drunk.

I have to digress for a moment and tell you a story. I used to teach French. At Christmastime I would teach my students carols in French and we would actually go caroling to other classrooms in the school. My partner Jill taught English at the same high school where I taught French, and I took a group of my (honors French) students to her (remedial English) class. Jill was expecting us, so we went in, and with little or no introduction, we sang some familiar carols to her students in French. Her students were really nice while my students were singing. Then, much later, Jill told me that when we left someone said, “Aww that was so sweet,” and another young man raised his hand to ask very sympathetically, “Are they *all* from the Special Ed classes? None of them knew the words.”

My purpose in telling this story is not to draw attention to this young man’s very politically incorrect assumption. But rather, to highlight how confusing it can be to hear what sounds like gibberish, in a grammatical frame that feels familiar. Speaking in tongues can also be quite manipulative. When there is no space created for it in a worship service it can be used to dominate a space, or can be used to indoctrinate children, by associating their open hearts and emotional experience solely to one frame of interpretation— to a *literal* Jesus.

Speaking in tongues can also be a pure and honest expression of one’s experience of the Holy. A means of getting out of the way and letting the sound come out without the weight of the words’ meanings. I have been in a Lakota sweat lodge where this kind of singing is encouraged, and it is very intimate, very moving and very powerful. I remember hearing a beautiful voice that

came from the ground and all around me. It was only when the song stopped and I realized I had closed my mouth that I knew it was me.

As Unitarians, I am not sure that we make enough room for the mystical in our lives. But while I believe that these personal mystical experiences are real, I also believe they must be flushed out. They must be held up to the light and examined with the rest of our understanding of the world. They must be viewed through the lenses of our biology and chemistry, our culture, our history and through the lens of reason.

You may not believe that a Unitarian could be struck by the spirit. I want to tell you another story. This one is about an atheist being struck by the spirit. When I was 16, I went to Paris for the first time, and visited Notre Dame Cathedral. I was an atheist at this point in my life. I had been kicked out of a black Baptist church for being white, a white Baptist church for dancing, and I gave up on the Methodists who were tired of my questions. My faith, at the time, was purely in education, and my frame, at sixteen, was that religion (and especially Catholicism) had started most of the world's wars.

So as I walked into Notre Dame for the very first time, there was a choir singing in Latin and the sound bounced all around the room. The smell of incense was strong, and it was dark with candles burning in nearly every enclave, lighting up the stained glass windows. I remember looking at the choir, looking at the tall stone ceiling made to draw the eye up so that the structure felt enormous and the people seemed quite small. I remember looking at the floor and seeing the names of saints buried underneath my feet written on the stone floor. And I remember thinking, "This is all so absurd, just absurd."

And I fainted.

I was not drunk. I had never fainted before and I have never fainted since. But in that moment I felt whisked through history. I went from creation to the present day as though I was seeing it unfold from the Creator's perspective. I saw the cathedral I was standing in, built on the backs of the lower classes. I saw people lifted up and worshiped instead of GOD. I saw people separated by religion, centuries of wars fought in the name of GOD, and I felt this overwhelming sense of sadness and confusion. We weren't getting it. Humanity was *just not getting it*.

And then I came to.

I told very few people about my experience until I went to seminary, where there is room created, even for Unitarians to talk mystically. I've since realized that the question is not whether or not we actually *have* experiences where we feel extremely connected to something outside ourselves. It is what we do with those experiences when we do. They do not make someone

better than someone else. I actually think that *many* people have feelings similar to this – where we connect so deeply to our sense of awe that time disappears. Actually, it may be quite ordinary.

That experience did not make me feel particularly special; it did not make me a catholic, or even a Christian for that matter. It *did* help me open my heart to believing GOD could exist beyond creed. I already believed that the variety of religious expressions were reflections of our culture. And those Gods were too small. What I hadn't considered, until then, was the possibility of a GOD *big* enough to transcend all of that.

As I understand it, most Pentecostals speak in tongues as frequently, if not more frequently, alone. In private prayer, it is focused more as a personal experience of GOD, and a personal relationship with GOD. And this is something that I believe Unitarians and Pentecostals actually have in common. (I was originally going to title this sermon *Why I am a Pentecostal*, but I thought you might not come.)

Unitarians and Pentecostals do agree on a few things. We agree that the revelation of GOD was not only at one time for one specific group of people. It is available to us today to experience in our own lives. The miracles of GOD's creation are all around us. We both use umbrella terms to cover a variety of religious understandings and expressions. Pentecostalism is an umbrella term that includes a wide range of different theological and organizational perspectives. Pentecostalism, broadly explained, teaches that personal conversion is to be followed by *holy living* and exhibiting the *fruit of the Spirit*. I think we can agree on that too.

Unitarian conversion, however it happened to us, holds us accountable to living out our faith in the world as well as in church. Also, one of the key focuses of this church is recognizing and using our gifts, which could easily be translated to “fruit of the Spirit.”

There are a couple of things about the story of the Pentecost that I'd like to point out this morning. The first is, the beauty of the miracle in this story in Acts, is not about speaking gibberish. It is about speaking in a language to those different than you that can be understood. The miracle is that those present hear their own language being spoken by foreigners. The miracle is as much about the *listening* as it is about the speaking. The miracle is, that even in conflicting cultures and languages, even in contradictions, when people speak from places of wonder, when they speak from experiences of awe, when they speak from their hearts filled with Spirit, filled with Love and connection, they are understood in their differences. And the differences remain – even adding flavor to the story.

The miracle is also connected to the law being handed down to Moses. The laws of Moses are there for us to grapple with, along with our experience of the spirit. The Bible is there for us to grapple with, in its richness *and* its contradictions. So placing it on this day says to me that we *will*

have contradictions. What will we do when the law and our experience is in contradiction? How do we practice that co-existence of difference? How do we honor our own experience, and the experience of others, with healthy boundaries that honor who we are? How do we keep our hearts open to each other and to change?

The first way is to listen with our hearts open. The second way is to come to church. We try to weave the threads of our difference through worship on Sunday morning. Having New Dimensions here has helped us to do an even better job of recognizing the beauty in our diversity. It is more evident than ever that the many facets of this diamond reflect the light of truth and of GOD. We need one another.

The third way that we can learn how to listen and be filled with spirit is in our new branches model. *Branches groups* are All Souls' version of small group ministry. A branches group is a group of 12 people who come together on a monthly basis with two trained facilitators. The agenda focuses on one of the 9 monthly themes that we cover in the church year.

Our themes are introduced the first Sunday of the month in worship to the adults and in the story for All Ages to the children. Then throughout the month our Children's Religious Education department has workshops on the themes for the kids, our monthly journal *Simple Gifts* has articles and poetry on the themes by the ministers, staff, and congregants. Our Alternative Worship experience, Soulful Sundown, which happens on the first Friday of the month, explores the theme with film and drama, slam poetry and all kinds of music and a much looser order of service in a more intimate setting. And Branches, our small groups, meet on the theme so people can have an opportunity to speak, not *in* tongues, but in their *own tongue*, from their own experience, on the theme.

The glory of this model is that we also learn how to really *listen* from what I would call Spirit. As everyone speaks from their own experience, within this frame of listening and honoring the silence, something very holy happens. A web of connection is woven and people begin to hear their own story in the very different stories of others. It is as though a tongue of fire descends on those speaking and the Holy Spirit fills the room! Ok, maybe it isn't quite *that* dramatic, but it does create a container for all kinds of difference. This branches model makes room for the introvert and the extrovert, men and women, gay and straight, with all kinds of different experiences and different understandings of the world. And I have yet to go to a Branches meeting without walking away in wonder. Wonder at the glory of people and their difference. And wonder at the glory of something very holy that connects us all.

The beauty of this practice, and I do consider it to be a small group spiritual practice, is that the model acts as the container for all of that difference. It allows for an opportunity to coexist – to

listen and be heard – in a way that regular day-to-day interaction does not often permit. It is a structure that creates an opportunity to practice healthy boundaries between you and others, and still makes room for you to be influenced and changed by their personal experience. It honors each person's value and valuable experience, and empowers the individual to weave their own thread of meaning using their experience, their reason, their conscience.

So, what happened on Pentecost is still happening. Even in Unitarian churches – maybe even more so here. Because we recognize that the miracle is in the speaking *and* the listening. The miracle is in the meaning, that can be conveyed in the translation, and that also extends well beyond it. The miracle is in our coexisting together.

What do we do when the law and our experience are in contradiction? How do we practice coexistence in our difference? How do we honor our own experience, and the experience of others, with healthy boundaries and keep our hearts open to each other and to change? We keep trying... and we pray. We stay connected to those around us... and we pray.

May we all declare the wonders of GOD. May we know the wonders of being human and being alive. And may we risk speaking in our own tongues!

Amen.

¹ Wikipedia: Mythical Origins of Language