



September 27, 2020

Melville United Church

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Worship prepared today by
Ruth Cooke

Welcome

We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples with whom Treaty 4, also known as the Haldimand Tract, was signed, and the territory wherein our church resides. We acknowledge our responsibilities to treaty people.

The Christ Candle Is Lit

Call to Worship/Prayer of Approach

This is my day:

a day of rest
a day of hope
a day of peace and happiness.

This is the day the Lord has made:

a day to sing
a day to praise
a day to become one in the Spirit.

This is the day the Lord has made.

This is my day.

This is your day.

This is our day.

Hymn: Praise the Lord with the Sound of Trumpet **VU 245**

Epistle Reading: Acts 2: 1-11

When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites;
Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;

Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;
Even Cretans and Arabs!

“They’re speaking our languages, describing God’s mighty works!”

Ministry of Music:

Meditation: “What Language Do You Speak?”

I recently took a month-long break from Facebook. I snoozed all of my groups except for Clergy with Cats, which consists entirely of cat pictures and cat stories from clergy around the world, and I unfollowed all of my friends.

I did this because the posts, even amongst my liberal, left-leaning friends, were becoming more and more polarized, more and more vicious towards those who didn’t feel the same as the poster, and more and more false, more and more shallow.

Truth doesn’t seem to matter anymore—lies get passed around by people on both sides of any issue. So long as the lies lend credence to the point of view of the poster, the ends are considered to justify the means.

The tipping point came when my brother’s niece posted a story about a checkout clerk who had been insulted by a customer. The story reads very well without knowing the ages of the clerk and the customer, and has the moral that checkout clerks are worthy of respect and shouldn’t be insulted. But the way the original poster had written the story, it was made to be about age. All boomers are entitled, rich, snobby customers who abuse the clerks, and all clerks are long-suffering millennials who don’t deserve the abuse.

I and another follower objected, and the reply was, “Well, you two are different.”

I continued to object, and eventually she consigned me to the “bad” group, meaning I was just like all the other boomers.

Now to understand this fully, you need to know that in most respects, my brother’s niece and I are generally in accord. We both champion the causes of oppressed groups against those with more power. But, like many Facebook posters of all ages, she fails to understand that the oversimplified language of memes polarizes people and sets groups of people against one another, rather than promoting the understanding that will lead to true solutions.

Language has power. What we say, what we read, what we hear... if we say it, or read it, or hear it often enough, it becomes what we believe, and what we believe informs and dictates our actions.

If what we say, what we read, and what we hear are all simplified or one-sided arguments, our actions will be misinformed at best, and extremely harmful at worst.

Think of the rhetoric surrounding the coronavirus. In the beginning, the news reports were all about how deadly it was...

...for those over 80. Young people, hearing only the half-truth that seniors were particularly vulnerable, began to believe that they weren't vulnerable, with the end result that most new cases are now in people between the ages of 20 and 59, with a large number of those being in the 20 to 29 age group.

How we speak about something impacts not only how we act, but how others act as well.

The antagonism surrounding mask wearing is a case in point. We don't wear masks to protect ourselves. We wear masks because a significant number of people with COVID have no symptoms, and masks prevent those who have the disease and don't know it from passing it on to others. It's an act of caring for others, not an act of protecting ourselves.

And yet, mask wearing has, from the beginning, been presented in a way that appeals to a person's self-interest, and not to the instinct to love and care for others. It's been presented as a dictate from on high, instead of an act of caring for the common good.

What has happened, from the beginning of the pandemic, is the failure of those in authority to speak the language of the people. Not all the time, of course, but often enough that the big parties and the mask protests continue.

Another example, probably more close to home for most of us, is the problem of what some call "love languages."

Some people like and need to be told, often multiple times a day that they are loved.

Others prefer hugs and can't hear the words.

Still others prefer flowers and gifts, and think hugs are cheap.

And others, such as myself, prefer actions to words and gifts. I love the flowers, but I love it even more if you'll help me with the housework.

And difficulties often arise when partners don't speak the same love language. A spouse will bring flowers, because that's the way *they've* been taught to show love, when their partner only wants a hug.

One partner will keep the home spotless, because that's what they believe shows love, when the other simply wants a cozy evening watching movies, eating popcorn, and discussing the day.

You get the idea, I'm sure.

We have that problem with language in church, too.

Over the centuries, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has become codified. It has become so codified that there are actually some people who believe that Jesus spoke English, King James English, to be exact.

Worship, too, is language. What to say and when to say it. When to sit down and to stand up. How many hymns do we sing? What is the topic of the sermon, and who preaches it, and how does the congregation respond.

I once had the amusing experience of visiting one of my former congregations on the occasion of their anniversary. The guest preacher was a Black Southern Baptist preacher, and he tried his very best throughout the sermon to get this mostly senior, white, middle class United Church congregation to say, "Amen!" as a response during the sermon. By the end of the sermon, there were a few enthusiastic Amens, and a bunch more quiet, half-hearted ones, but it was tough going for most of the sermon.

The sermon itself was excellent, but he just wasn't speaking our language, and most of us weren't willing to learn his.

But this passage in Acts calls us out of ourselves, calls us to allow the Spirit in and to give up those props of language that we hold dear in order to communicate the very much needed message of God's love for all people.

In our world today, there are many, many people who have given up on church. They haven't given up on church because the message of God's love is no longer relevant. They haven't given up on church because they don't believe in God. They haven't given up on church because they no longer yearn for a more spiritual understanding of the world. In fact—just the opposite. Interest in Spirituality is at an all-time high.

The church just after the Resurrection was nothing more than a cult or sect of Palestinian Judaism. In this passage from Acts, we see the Spirit infect it so that it becomes more. More than just Palestinian Jews hear the message as the disciples begin to speak in the tongues of "every nation under Heaven," and the Jews from other nations begin to believe the Gospel.

Later in Acts, we hear about those like Paul who are sent to expand the message to the Gentiles.

But the Spirit that infected that early church has, over the centuries, been beaten down. Once the church became a tool of the state, it began to use the language of the state to control the people, so that now many people view religion, ALL religion, as an effort to control those with no power, and to give more power to those already in control.

We need to change our language. We need to allow the Spirit to descend upon us as at that first Pentecost, and learn to speak the language of the peoples.

How do we do that?

We honestly can't tell that right now—the tongues of fire that touched the disciples gave each one the gift to speak a *different* language. Not everybody spoke the same one.

We need to be open.

An illustration of this is a story by a woman named BJ Jensen. She loved the music ministry at her large church, but describes herself as “profoundly singing-challenged.” So she developed her own way to express her love and joy of music.

She “sang” at the top of her fingertips with the use of sign language and movement. She had taught herself to sign to music at the age of five, in order to obey parents who believed that children should be seen and not heard.

She was a “closet signer,” in her words, but one day the leader of the adult choir saw her do it and asked if she would sign the anthem. She resisted, and was asked to pray about it.

Her prayer went something like this:

“Oh, Lord, you know how impossible it would be for me to sign in public. You know how I only like to sign for you. I could never sign in front of the church. And I’m sure you don’t want me to, right?”

Now, I’m wondering if this woman had read her Bible recently, specifically the stories about the call of Moses, and Sarah, and David, and the disciples, and Paul, and...

Because anyone who’s read those stories knows how they all end.

She now leads a 400 person strong signing choir that tours and performs multiple times throughout the year.

Because what God told her is that people need to see what a love relationship with God looks like, and they need to see or hear it in a language they can understand.

When we’re giving love to our spouses or children or friends, we need to take the hard road and learn their “love language” in order for the message to get through.

When we preach the gospel to those outside our little family, we need to learn the language that will reach them most effectively. A person on the edge of starvation doesn’t want a sermon or a bible, they want food. A person on the street doesn’t need a hymn or a prayer, they need a home. A person suffering from sickness or grief doesn’t need a lecture, they need healing.

If we think back to the gospel stories, the stories of Jesus’ earthly ministry, we will realize that that’s exactly what he did, and that’s exactly why his message succeeded when the established religions of the day failed.

Let us leave our comfort zone. Let us live the gospel, but let us live it with the humility to accept that the way we speak must conform to what those who need the gospel can hear, and not conform to our own limited language.

Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

In our prayers, let us give thanks for the gifts of God,
and pray for those who work in God's vineyard.
We give you thanks, blessed Spirit.

For the bounty of the earth,
for the goodness within the human heart,
for the power to change and the will to learn,
let us give thanks.

For all those who work for healing,
for the people in the caring ministries,
for ecologists and researchers,
for pastoral care workers and friends,
for the hands of Christ in the world,
let us give thanks.

For all those who learn and teach,
for apprentices and supervisors,
for students and resource people,
for program directors and camp leaders,
for schools and educators,
for wisdom and knowledge and guidance,
let us give thanks.

For those who struggle for liberation and justice,
for the witness of base communities,
for the mission and development workers,
for those who risk their lives for others,
for those who work for human rights,
for those who speak truth on behalf of the oppressed, for all who bear witness to the way of Christ,
let us give thanks in the name of the one who taught us when we pray to say:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing (written by *Clare McBeath and Tim Presswood*):

May the God who created a world of diversity and vibrancy,
Go with us as we embrace life in all its fullness.

May the Son who teaches us to care for stranger and foreigners,
Go with us as we try to be good neighbors in our communities.

May the Spirit who breaks down our barriers and celebrates community,
Go with us as we find the courage to create a place of welcome for all.

Musical Commissioning: Sent Forth by God's Blessing **VU 481**