



The Gift and Challenges of Language

By

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First Lesson | Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Second Lesson | Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were

amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Sermon

During a sabbatical eight years ago, I was blessed to visit Armenia and Georgia, Kenya, and South Africa. While English is mostly the language of commerce, there were still times when I ended up communicating with hand gestures. A couple of those countries have their own alphabet, too. Thus, along with all of the other lessons gained in those twelve weeks away from work, I was given a steady reminder of the gift and challenge of language.

I learned, for instance, that during the Soviet era, officials did not bother to learn the Georgian or Armenian language but instead forced the locals to speak Russian. I discovered that Kenya has 43 tribes, the majority of which have subtribes, all with variations in dialect, though English or Kiswahili is spoken by most. I learned that South Africa has 12 official languages and that some of its troubles in the 19th and 20th centuries

arose from which dialect would be required.

This morning, I want to reflect with you on our two Scripture lessons by sharing some insights gained during my time in the Republic of South Africa. I do so, fully aware that linguistic blessings and difficulties are not limited to one nation. Etymologists count nearly 7200 languages spoken on our planet today. Scripture tells us it all began with the Tower of Babel.

“Now the whole earth had one language,” we read, “and the same words.” That verse in Genesis picks up the narrative several generations after the great flood of Noah’s time, telling of a day the people decide to build a tower that will touch the heavens. “Otherwise,” they say, “we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” God hears their musings and declares that if humans are successful, “nothing they propose to do will be impossible.” So, the Creator mixes up their languages, and soon the people begin to move away from each other. “Therefore, it was called Babel,” the text concludes, “because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them

abroad over the face of the earth.”

From our perspective, a divine concern about tall buildings and human creativity makes no sense, especially given the skyscrapers and incredible acts of progress since that day. Instead, many scholars suggest the real issue was that God had instructed the people to fill the earth and viewed their plan for a tower as an act of resistance. Thus, confusing their language became a critical step toward God’s intention of a planet with numerous territorial and linguistic groups.

The reading from Acts further explains the divine purpose of language as it recalls the Day of Pentecost. Fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles are all together when suddenly the sound of wind fills the house. ”Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,” Luke writes, “and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them abilities.” Jews from every nation lived in Jerusalem, and at the sound of that wind, they assembled outside the house. The apostles are inside, but through open windows, everyone outside can

hear the discussion and receive it in their own language, much as speeches at the United Nations are immediately translated for the listener. “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” they ask. “How is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language...hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power?”

That moment from the first century has sometimes been referred to as a reversal of the Tower of Babel and a day that marks the birthday of the church. Heard side-by-side, our two Biblical lessons make clear that language has been a gift and a challenge since the beginning.

In his autobiography *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah tells of life in South Africa in the era of apartheid. His mother is black, and his father is white. That racial mix dramatically shaped his childhood. At one point, he writes about a particular tool of the government. “Language brings with it an identity and a culture,” Noah says, “or at least the perception of it. A shared language says, ‘We’re the same.’ A language barrier says, ‘We’re different.’ The architects of apartheid understood this. Part of the effort to divide black people was to make sure we were separated not just physically

but by language as well. In the Bantu schools, children were only taught in their home language. Zulu kids learned in Zulu. Tswana kids learned in Tswana. Because of this, we'd fall into the trap the government had set for ourselves, believing that we were different.

“The great thing about language,” Noah went on, “is that you can just as easily use it to do the opposite: convince people that they are the same. Racism teaches us that we are different because of the color of our skin...If you're racist and you meet someone who doesn't look like you, the fact that he can't speak like you reinforces your racist preconceptions... However, if the person who doesn't look like you speaks like you, your brain short-circuits...‘Wait, wait,’ your mind says, ‘the racist code says if he doesn't look like me he isn't like me, but the language code says if he speaks like me he...is like me? Something is off here. I can't figure this out.’” (Noah, Trevor, *Born A Crime*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2016, p. 49-50)

Language is a powerful force for good or harm, not only for a government seeking to force its will on a diverse population. Words change meaning as some everyday forms of expression in

the past are no longer acceptable today, and familiar words from years gone by carry an entirely different connotation today. Texting and emails allow for direct contact, but since tone of voice or facial expression is lost with those tools, emojis were created to express the feeling behind words. Social media offers instantaneous communication, which can be helpful in sharing your perspective with many at one time, but its lack of face-to-face interaction and anonymity can result in cruelty and bullying and a loss of reflective thought. Language is challenging, yet even when we don't understand the actual words, we can get the point.

One day during that sabbatical, I was flying out of Johannesburg when my host dropped me off at O.R. Tambo International Airport. After I thanked him for the hospitality offered by his family and himself over three days, I made my way to the ticket counter. I handed over my passport, and the agent said, “May I see your boarding pass?” “Sure,” I replied, “I downloaded it this morning onto my phone.” I reached into my pocket, and the phone wasn't there. I checked all of my other pockets with no success either. I looked into each section

of my backpack, checking every part twice, also to no avail. A sinking feeling washed over me as I realized that I must have left it in my host's car and now he was gone. I had entered his number into my phone contacts, but of course, I needed my phone to retrieve it. Suddenly, I remembered how earlier that day, I had tossed out scraps of paper collected on my trip, and on seeing the stub from my boarding pass to Johannesburg, had almost thrown it out, too, but decided at the last minute to keep it. I quickly found that paper, on the back of which I had written the phone number of my host!

You can imagine the relief as I handed it over to the ticket agent and asked if someone could call him. They were happy to do that, and 10 minutes later, my host returned with my phone in hand. It had fallen in between the car seats, which was why neither of us had noticed it before. I went back to the same ticket agent and pulled up my electronic boarding pass. "Here it is," I announced as I handed her my phone. She looked at the pass. "Are you flying on South African Airways?" "Yes," I answered. She replied, "Then, you need to go to the South African Airways counter." I looked up and discovered my adventure had played

out with the wrong airline! I apologized, asked where the counter I needed was located, and thanked her profusely. She smiled patiently, yet as I left, turned to a fellow agent and muttered something that was audible, but not in one of South Africa's twelve languages I knew. Yet I didn't need a translation to understand how she was commenting on this clueless American tourist standing in front of them!

The events of Pentecost allowed people to understand in their own language, and yet it did so with a message far more significant than finding the right airline counter. The gift of the Holy Spirit did not mean that from that moment forward we could readily translate all the languages of creation, at least not without some phone app. The confusion that began at the Tower of Babel has not been wiped away either. Even when both parties speak the same language, there are times when we or the other does not understand. The gift of the Spirit did not end such confusion.

Yet the day of Pentecost does make clear that a primary task as followers of Jesus Christ is to use our words to speak of what God has done. That no matter

what language we use, our words and deeds are meant to bear witness to God's power. Or as one scholar wrote, the gift of the Holy Spirit "does not then overturn the multiplicity of languages but enables people who speak various languages to hear and understand the one gospel for all the earth. The people are then scattered over the earth to proclaim the gospel rather than their own concerns." (Fretheim, Terrence in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume I. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 414)

I saw that lived out eight years ago during worship at a Methodist Church in Port Edward, South Africa. On the Sunday I was present, the service included a time of healing as people came forward for prayer and anointing with oil. I asked my hosts if that was a typical part of worship there and learned that it was not. Among those who walked up that morning was a young girl. When she returned, I noticed that people of all ages around her were wearing blue t-shirts with the depiction of a glowing sun and some words I couldn't read. After the service, I learned the girl is seven years old. Diagnosed with kidney cancer five years earlier, the treatment had gone well, but the disease had returned. In a few days, the family

would travel to Russia for treatment. A bake sale had been held at the church for them the day before.

Someone then told me that the family was not members of the congregation and that no one locally had even known them three days earlier. They lived in Johannesburg, five hundred miles away, and were in Port Edward because a friend had offered them use of her beach house. That friend knew a man from the Methodist church named Peter. She called him on Friday to tell him the family was in town and describe their circumstances. Peter called his pastor, and the next day, their church had the bake sale, and on Sunday, a time for healing during worship. The t-shirts had been made on Saturday and were worn by people who had just met the family.

I was so impressed by the way that body of faith had responded. So, on hearing the full story, I sought out the parents, told them I was a pastor from the United States, that I was deeply moved by their situation and what the congregation had done, and how I would be praying for them and their daughter as treatments proceeded. The father thanked me and spoke confidently of a positive outcome.

The mom simply said, “God is good. His mercy is forever sure.”

No matter what language we use, that is the story we have to share. No matter whether we are far from home or settled into our own place of worship, it is an opportunity to speak and listen as the Holy Spirit gives us the ability. And when we do that, just like our ancestors in the faith, there will be no need for translation, as others will understand anew this amazing God we serve.