

## “What Does This Mean?”

Acts 2:1-21

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On Pentecost, God did something God had never done before: God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, gifting them with the ability to speak in all the known languages of the world at that time. Suddenly, out of the blue, the apostles were proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in Spanish and French and German and Italian and in Russian and in Turkish, and, who knows, maybe even in Chichewa!

And they weren't whispering. They were shouting! And they caused quite an uproar. Passersby came to a halt. A cacophony of voices rang out. I imagine they sounded like the Hartford Symphony Orchestra during the time they are tuning up their instruments, all belting out unrelated notes and sounds at the same time.

A crowd gathered. And someone in that crowd blurted out the most profound theological question of all time: What does this mean? If there were one question we were allowed to carry with us into space, or onto a desert island or into a Bible story, or into a dream, it would be this question: what does this mean?

On that day of Pentecost, no one in the crowd had ever encountered such a scene: Hebrew people from Jerusalem, home town folks, speaking in foreign tongues, articulating the mighty deeds of God such that travelers heading to the Holy City could hear in their native languages the Good News of God's redeeming love. What does this mean?

First, it means that God not only calls us to be disciples; God also EQUIPS us for discipleship. You know the story about the farm boy whose mother kept a barrel of molasses in the kitchen pantry. He sneaked in there every day and scooped out a finger full to satisfy his sweet tooth. The level of molasses got lower and lower in the barrel until the boy had to reach down so far that he tumbled right into the gooey molasses. Totally covered, he managed to look toward heaven, folded his hands, and prayed, “God grant me a tongue worthy of this occasion!” I have no doubt God equipped him for the task at hand!

On the day of Pentecost, God equipped the apostles for a ministry of proclaiming the Word throughout the known world. God gave them tongues worthy of this ministry.

As I ponder this aspect of the story, I am awed by people who have mastered the art of sign language. When I attend large meetings of the wider church, I always notice someone interpreting the sermon for the deaf in the congregation. The sign language is both lovely and dramatic. I consider these men and women to be Pentecostal people; ones gifted with language for communicating with a certain population of God’s sons and daughters. One of my personal heroes is Thomas Gallaudet. He was a student at Yale when he met 9 year old Alice Cogswell who was deaf. This encounter inspired him to study sign language, and, as I’m sure you know, founded the American School for the Deaf in Hartford in 1817. The work of the Holy Spirit is to equip women and men with language such that doors of opportunity fling wide open for everyday people.

What does this mean? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit equips us with special languages for proclaiming the mighty deeds of God? During my first week in seminary, I got an interview for the youth ministry position at the United Methodist Church in Waltham, Massachusetts.

They were hiring and I needed some income. On my way to the interview, it dawned on me that I had never actually been in a youth group, had never been on a mission trip, had no idea what young teens think about, and certainly had not mastered ‘teen-speak.’ I have no idea why they hired me! After the first youth group meeting, the senior high adult advisor took me to one side, put a hand on my shoulder, and spoke the following words. “Don’t worry. We’ll teach you everything you need to know.” That was McKinley Hackett. To this day, I thank God for that man! He was the Holy Spirit to me. The Spirit sent him to me! He gifted me with language for communicating Good News to junior and senior high students. McKinley Hackett made all the difference!

Here at South Church, I am amazed at the number of adults who have mastered this language I call “teen-speak.” This is a rapidly evolving language. The vocabulary shifts monthly, if not weekly. It requires frequent refresher courses. Middle School advisors and Wednesday School teachers are Pentecost people! They carry the essence of the Gospel to the classrooms and to the supper table and to the volleyball court and to service projects. I believe the youth ministry at South Church is effective, in large part, because young people hear hopeful words in a language they can understand.

In Confirmation this spring, we assembled a science panel, men and women of faith whose vocation places them in the world of science. We asked them to talk with our sophomores about how they understand the confluence between science and faith. At the end of the hour, the students wanted more! They didn’t want the class to end. These faith-based scientists were speaking their native tongue. It was astonishing to behold!

What does this mean? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit equips us with language for proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in multiple settings? It seems to me that the mighty deeds of God generate a climate of hopefulness.

But there are precious few in the world today who have gained a fluency in the language of hope. Thus, the mighty deeds of God are over-shadowed by the mighty deeds of darkness. Lots of commentators have earned a PhD in the language of fear. I don't see too many who have enrolled in Hope 101. This is becoming a foreign language, not a language that rolls off the tongue easily. Yet the mighty deeds of God are all around us!

Thus, I propose we initiate The South Church School of Language. There will be only one course offered in the curriculum: the Language of Hope. A person can take the course as often as one wishes, as often as it takes to gain a level of fluency. The course will use the Acts of the Apostles chapter two as the textbook. We'll focus on naming the mighty deeds of God. We'll learn the language of hope. People driving by on Main Street will be halted in their tracks. They'll be asking, 'what does this mean?'

And we'll be able to reply: It means that those living with depression find hope at Inter-Community Mental Health.

It means those living without a purpose find hope in a Tuesday Morning Bible class.

It means those living without a home find hope at South Park Inn.

It means those living with guilt or shame find release at the Communion table.

It means those who long for meaning find hope when they volunteer with Adults on the Level.

It means that those living with cancer find hope when a pastor or a friendly visitor comes by with a word of prayer.

It means that the language of hope trumps the language of fear.

What I know is that the Holy Spirit of God equips us all for ministries of hope. And this is why we walk into the future in the greatest of hope! Amen!