

## **May 24th: The Language of Unity**

Good morning again my friends, and welcome to our new series, Mosaic–this is a series devoted to exploring the intentional diversity of our Bible, Jesus’ ministry, and the world-wide church. We believe that diversity was always God’s plan–so we’ll be taking a closer look at how we can appreciate that diversity, work towards equity for a wide variety of individuals and groups, and make inclusion a core tenet of our faith and practice. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not bad words in God’s vocabulary–they are in fact essential to the love and transformation that God promises us as part of our personal and the renewing of our world.

Together we’ll discover how we can embrace this reality and build stronger communities that truly reflect God’s character and compassion. I hope that by the end of this series, you feel even more eager to welcome new people, hear other perspectives, and honor the experiences of people who might look, act, believe, and live differently than we do.

Let’s take a deep breath, and center ourselves with prayer.

*Tongue of Fire, we gather in this sacred place today to be reminded of your uniting power. As you descend upon us this morning, we long to hear your good news in ways that we can hear and share. We long for words that will bring peace and harmony to our fractured world. We need to be guided towards a community that makes room for different voices, different languages, and different perspectives. Enter our hearts and our mouths this day, and give us the tools to listen, understand, empathize, and build wholeness. Send us out this week with a message of hope and transformation. Amen.*

Some of you may know this about me already, but for those who don’t, I am a big linguistics nerd–I have always been fascinated by languages and communication. It started young, when my step grandfather tried to teach me some French words and songs, continued into middle school where I spent five years learning Spanish, and then followed me into college when I switched

to Italian so that I could study abroad in Florence. By the time I reached seminary, I was told that I needed to study two more languages in order to graduate: Koine Greek and Hebrew, and instead of being daunted by this challenge, I was genuinely excited. In fact, I was so committed to these language classes that I took them both as summer intensives—six weeks, four hours of instruction each day, plus hours and hours of homework and reading. Honestly, it was actually pretty fun, it felt like immersing myself in something foreign and novel, a way to step back in time and leave the modern world for a little while. And unlike my previous studies, this involved new alphabets, learning to read from right to left instead of left to right, and speaking words and phrases that are no longer familiar to many of our contemporary ears. I still remember this time fondly, even if those languages were difficult.

So including English, that is five languages inside my brain—all at varying stages of fluency. I'm not counting French, because at this point, all I've got are the horrifying lyrics to the children's song "Allouette," and that is definitely not enough to have a normal conversation. You might think that all those different languages would be neatly tucked away in their own little boxes, but the reality is that it's a total cacophony—nothing is organized and everything sounds like a giant symphony is playing but all the instruments are in different keys. I can pick out certain words when I need them, but sometimes, I'll need a Spanish phrase but only able to translate it into Italian, or I'll want to speak Italian but it will come out with Spanish verbs and conjugations. It's a total mess, and I'm hoping that someday I'll have some time to dedicate to relearning each one in full. But for now, I struggle to order a basic plate of fajitas at my favorite Mexican restaurant.

But beyond these specific languages, it's actually the science behind languages that most interests me. The ability to speak and communicate with others is the result of millions of years of human development, and it's a fairly recent skill in the grand scheme of our species. Evolutionary biologists estimate that proto language may have begun with our Homo Erectus ancestors about 1.8 million years ago, but complex language with specific words and phrases wasn't created until Homo Sapiens fully developed around one hundred

thousand to two hundred thousand years ago. That may sound like a long time ago, but it's the blink of an eye in terms of our planet's history. In that time, our species evolved a new and specific part of our anatomy, the hyoid bone, that allowed for speech and language to finally become part of our social bonding. We also had to experience significant shifts in our brains to accommodate this new skill—it took thousands of generations for this cognitive ability to grow and make it possible for us to communicate with each other.

How amazing is that? Every time we speak, we are an evolutionary marvel. Every time we use language to express love, offer comfort, bring wisdom, or inspire, we live out our ancient ancestors' wildest dreams.

I think we take this for granted, don't you? Isn't it a miracle that we can try to understand each other this deeply? It's it a miracle that we can create this kind of connection by using our brains and bodies? Isn't it a miracle that language continues to evolve and our methods of communication continue to expand?

I would argue so!

And speaking of miracles, we have another one to take a closer look at today, from the New Testament Book of Acts. This part of scripture describes what happens to the early church after Jesus' death and resurrection—the disciples who learned from Jesus are now sent out into the world to become apostles—leaders who teach others about Jesus' message and the offer of salvation. Despite how exciting this might sound, it was not an easy time. The new apostles lived in fear of retribution from the Roman authorities and their own Jewish priests and teachers. The followers of Jesus were facing all kinds of questions about how to communicate the gospel to other people—how could they invite both Jews and Gentiles into fellowship?

All to say, the passage we're about to look at has this inherent chaotic quality to it—it's loud and confusing, just like the cacophony in my brain.

Chapter 2 begins with this: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

So step one: the apostles are together when this rush of air comes into their home and fire appears on top of their heads. This is the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, they are now empowered by God’s divine presence to speak using God’s power and authority. This is what Jesus had promised them as he ascended into heaven, which is recorded in Acts 1. In verse 8 of that chapter, Jesus had said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The word that Jesus uses for “power” in this verse is the greek term, “δύναμις” which is specifically used to describe divine, miraculous power. It’s not referring to simple ability, or the physical strength to do something, but an inner, holy energy that transcends our human limitations. It describes a type of power that resides inside of a person or object, unable to be taken away. This is the new reality for the apostles—they have been empowered with some rare and precious, a force that fills them and shines out of them. And it rests above them as tongues of fire, so that this new power can be shared—it was never meant for them to keep to themselves.

So verse 5 continues, “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to

Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

This is step two: the sharing of God’s powerful communication. We can imagine that as all these different groups of people were moving about the city, perhaps doing their grocery shopping, or visiting the Temple, they were all speaking in their own native languages—these different tongues mixing and swirling around the streets of Jerusalem. But instead of hearing clashing sounds or difficulty hearing each other, they were suddenly able to understand exactly what the apostles were saying. At first, some are concerned that this situation is more like a prank, a practical joke brought on by too much drinking. Some say, “They have had too much wine,” despite the fact that it was nine in the morning.

But Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends, stands up and quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel, saying, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”

Joel was a lesser known prophet for first century Jews, but this prophecy from his writings would have been familiar. And so Peter takes these ancient verses and turns them into this message for the moment—he declares this promise of God’s spirit has come true. Peter, through these words of Joel, casts this vision of a mosaic of God’s people—young and old, men and women, servants and free, the Spirit will be poured out on everyone. No one is excluded from this gift. Peter then tells the crowd that everyone who uses their voice to call on the name of the Lord will be saved—no matter what language they speak. God will hear them all.

I think this is a powerful example of how words, especially words given to us by God, are able to transform our world. But here’s my big question for us today: if words are so powerful, and the ability to communicate with each

other carries the ability to share God's love and liberation, then why are human beings so careless with our own words?

Why are we so quick to jump to rage filled arguments and leave hateful comments on social media? Why do we give into gossip and repeat rumors that we don't know are true? Why do we use such loaded terms to describe everyday things—using violent imagery or sensitive language for basic conversation? Why is propaganda such a big part of our news and culture? Why do corporate jobs seem to revolve around intentionally frustrating jargon? Why has so much humor been reduced to cutting sarcasm instead of wit or actual cleverness? Why do we often default to cliches and trite phrases instead of sharing how we really feel? Why do we employ hyperbole instead of searching for the precisely right word to use?3

In her book, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre argues that a careful and truthful use of language is a moral necessity—using our words thoughtfully and being good stewards of our language is a spiritual responsibility. She implores her readers to rediscover the ways that language can bring us together, can help us learn new truths, and can guide our communities towards linguistic and emotional wholeness. She actually offers her readers 12 different ways that we can cultivate a better approach to communication—everything from “telling the truth” and “not tolerating lies,” to “stay in conversation,” and “love the long sentence.” She advocates for telling more stories, incorporating poetry into our normal routines, and even cherishing silence as its own form of language.

Here's a quote that resonated with me: “Caring for one another is not entirely separable from caring for words. Words are entrusted to us as equipment for our life together, to help us survive, guide, and nourish one another. We need to take the metaphor of nourishment seriously in choosing what we “feed on” in our hearts, and in seeking to make our conversation with each other life-giving.”

This one too: “When we converse, we act together toward a common end, and we act upon one another. Indeed, conversation is a form of activism - a political enterprise in the largest and oldest sense - a way of building and sustaining community.”

If we want to be true to our calling of carrying out God’s mosaic mission, then it sounds like the words we use matter.

Think about all the times you communicate each day—the text you send to a friend, the dinner conversation with your partner, the mountain of emails you have to read and respond to. Can you take a breath before responding in anger? Can you listen better to what someone is saying to you? Can you take extra time to sit with some good poetry? Are there opportunities to be curious about your child’s day? Are there ways to deepen a phone call with a relative? Are there topics or tactics that you could try to create more of this nourishment for ourselves and others? How can you introduce yourself to a visitor in our congregation? How can you engage with someone in the grocery store? How can you speak to yourself more kindly?

Can you commit to trying at least one thing this week to be thoughtful with your words? Even if you’re not ready to change anything just yet, can you commit to being more mindful—simply noticing your language and observing your conversations?

My friends, because of this Pentecost moment, we have the Holy Spirit inside each of us. Every one who makes a decision to follow Jesus receives this gift, it resides inside of us like a holy fire and none of the forces in our world have the ability to extinguish it. If we want unity, we have the δύναμις, we have the power to create it. If we want connection, we have the power to build it. If we want peace, we have the power to speak it into existence. If we want to be God’s mosaic, we have to practice it, so that the words are on the tips of our tongues and not just rolling around in our heads.

Out of the cacophony and chaos of our human brokenness, our words can bring hope. Our words, like the prophecy of Joel, can dream a bigger dream. Our words, like the speech made by Peter, can guide us into a new vision. Our words, like the ones spoken by the disciples, and heard by the nations, can bind us together as God's mosaic people.

This week, let us not forget that our words are miracles that can transform our world.

Amen.