

What does this mean?

Acts 2:1-12

May 30, 2010

“All of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!” Amazed and confused, they kept asking each other, “What does this mean?”

What does this mean?

It means you don't have to understand Hebrew to be able to hear of the great things God has done. Or Greek. Or Latin. Or English.

It means you don't have to know any language other than your own, whatever your native language is, to hear of the great things God has done, because the gospel, the good news, will be spoken to you in your language. The good news about God's love for you, made real through Jesus' life and death and resurrection, will be told to you in your own language.

It means you don't have to go looking for the good news. The good news will come to you, in a form you will recognize, in words you will understand. Whether you are a schoolteacher in Iowa or a stockbroker in New York, a rice farmer in Indonesia or a mine worker in Ghana, a country music fan or a rapper, a member of Gen X or Y or the “greatest generation,” a lover of tradition or lover of the newest and coolest, a redneck or a hippie -- whatever you are and however you speak and in whatever culture you are immersed, the gospel will come to you in words and in ways you can understand.

The gospel will not require you to change your clothes or change your language or change your customs or change your tastes. It will only ask you to change ... your heart! No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, the good news about Jesus speaks your language.

What does this mean?

It means that when the people of God -- we -- are filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we become multilingual. Not every one of us speaks every language or even many languages, but together, as the body of Christ, as the community of followers of Jesus, we speak every language. Everyone will hear the good news in their own languages because there will be those among us, enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who will learn to speak them.

The Holy Spirit is the gift of God's own presence, in us and among us, but not just for us. The Holy Spirit is a comforter and teacher and strengthener, bringing us courage and wisdom and peace. But the Holy Spirit is also a motivator and an equipper, charging us and giving us the tools to re-express and re-interpret and re-imagine the gospel in ways others may hear it and understand it.

We are called to be witnesses to what we have seen and heard and experienced, but not just by repeating the same words we have heard over and over again. Lydia and Cornelius and the Philippian jailer heard the message about Jesus in words they could understand, but the words used to tell you about Jesus were different words. And you will need to use still different words to tell the story to Manuel or Li Wen or Chidiegwu. You will need different words to tell the story to those who sing different songs or come from different backgrounds or see the world through the lens of experiences different from your own.

What does this mean?

It means the gospel is meant for everybody and belongs to everybody. You know that, right? You believe that, right? We know it, but how do we live it?

How do we live and practice and witness to a faith that is genuinely multicultural? It begins with our worship, with worship that is genuinely multicultural: worship that acknowledges expressions of faith in languages other than English; worship that celebrates ways the gospel is embodied in cultures other than American; worship that encourages us to look at ourselves and our world from a truly global perspective.

When we sing and pray with words borrowed from other cultures, at least three important things happen ...

The first thing that happens is that we are changed. We have much to learn from people who see the world from a different point of view, who bring to this moment in history a different set of experiences, whose ways are not our ways. They are people of God, too, and only together, only bringing together our diverse insights and our differing strengths and our distinctive ways of embodying the Spirit of Christ, do we properly and fully reflect the image of God in us. Alone, apart, at odds, we are all poorer for it, all weaker for it.

The second thing that happens when we worship using songs and prayers from cultures other than our own, our witness is truer. Christ's body is made up of many different parts. The true church is a global, multicultural church. If our worship creates the impression that all Christians speak and sing and pray the same way, or that being American or being Iowan or being congregational or

being wealthy and white is as important a feature in us as belonging to Christ, then we are witnessing to a false gospel and hurting the cause of God's kingdom in this world.

Our one church is not yet a true and complete image of the church as God intends it, in all its diversity and multifaceted beauty, but when we sing and pray with words and sounds borrowed from other people and other places, we offer a picture of the church as it should be ... and as it will be!

We are changed. Our witness is truer. And we practice hospitality. We provide hospitality to other Christian brothers and sisters, sometimes without even knowing it.

John Bell, a songwriter and song collector and member of the Iona Community, says: "In the body of Christ, we are either a joined up body or we are not the body of Christ. We sing songs not just to please ourselves, but for others' sake, too." He tells of singing songs from South Africa in Scottish churches during the time of apartheid. Visitors from the African continent hearing the songs would tell them: "At time when we are not allowed to sing our songs, someone else is singing our songs until we can sing them again." When we sing and pray with words borrowed from other cultures, we make "space" in our worship for those who belong.

Amazed and confused, they kept asking each other, "What does this mean?"

It means that where the Holy Spirit is genuinely present, you will always find a wonderful chaos of sights and sounds! Sure, it may be a little confusing, but it is most certainly amazing!