



"Lost in Translation"  
a sermon by

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While we do have one special day reserved for Pentecost in the Spring in the liturgical calendar, it is a story worth telling more than once a year, I believe. So our New Testament Lesson for this morning comes from the book of Acts 2:1-13. This scene comes to us just after Jesus had foretold the coming of the Spirit to the disciples, and after his ascension into heaven. Hear now the Word of God.

“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 nation 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 Paphlagonia, 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.” Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

“Dobre outra.” Helena, the youngest daughter of Pavel, the pastor of Hope Baptist Church in Rayzan, Russia, was looking at me intently- she was 14- and this was our first language lesson together since our mission team arrived at her church that cool and overcast Saturday afternoon two months ago this week. An expectant grin and glittering eyes lit up her already beautiful face. Ok, I’m thinking, this seems simple enough. Important phrase- it means ‘good morning’- this is a good one to learn. I’m a pretty quick study with languages and so was feeling moderately confident. “Dobre outra” I repeated, expecting a surprised ‘nice job! Great pronunciation!’ from my new friend, but instead she doubled over roaring with laughter, putting her hand on my shoulder to steady herself. “Niet, niet, Katya, (regaining her composure but still giggling) I am sorry. ‘dobre outra’. “Dobre outra,” I repeated. Again, laughter. “Dobre outra” she said. “Dobre outra,” I repeated- thinking that it really did sound exactly the same as she was saying. A fellow team member looked at me and shrugged- a little life raft of affirmation amid a sea of uncertainty and growing embarrassment as a few ladies from the kitchen now paused from their work to witness the crumbling of my ego. “Dobre outra,” “Dobre outra.” On and on. Finally, after a few more rounds that sounded, again, exactly the same, Helena put a hand on each of my shoulders, smiled and sighed. “Ah, Katya, nice try.” And turned and walked away.

And so began my prayers for a pentecost experience during our mission trip to Russia. And the first of many variations on the theme, “lost in translation.” Stumbling through communication, at an utter loss for how to express ourselves, our group that was charged with strengthening our relationship with our partner church in Russia was feeling like we were striking out on our goal as we were relegated to the language of nods and smiles, and simple sentences, when left to our own devices. We found ourselves longing for that Pentecostal moment when the Spirit would open our mouths to share with our new friends what was in our hearts. There were things we needed

to understand about them, and things they wanted to understand about us that simply could not be articulated even with the blessed gift of a translator. Some things, conceptually and grammatically, were just lost in translation. Which meant that occasionally two people would be left standing staring at each other in bewilderment, sharing in at least the mutual understanding that there was a gap in our experience of one another that would never be crossed. And this would leave us all feeling a little sad. But in a way, this mirrored the larger experience of this little church in its surrounding culture as well. Longing to express themselves as a church as we all do in a way that no one could miss, but if the matter seems pressing here in Charlotte, it feels downright urgent over there. In the post-communism culture of Russia in general and the city of Rayzan in particular, a city about the size of Charlotte and a military training center, one gets the feeling walking down the street staring into grim, expressionless faces and haunting, haunted eyes that this is a city of people who are starving to death spiritually and socially but who do not even know that they are hungry.

To give you a better idea of the context this church finds itself in, I'd like to describe to you a bit of what we saw. Imagine if you would a giant city of mid size buildings that looks as industrial as any city that supports plenty of government and industry while boasting none of the wealth. It is a weekday, mid-morning and cars pack the smoggy streets and pedestrians risk their lives scampering through traffic. Look in any direction and you will see rows and rows of communist-style concrete apartment buildings stretching for miles, reaching up into the sky while paint and laundry hang off of them like the shredded skin of a banana dangling in ribbons while the fruit beneath turns brown and decays. On one of the side streets along side these apartments, broken glass and syringes litter the ground of an overgrown back lot where some older boys smoke marijuana and cigarettes and drink beer, pretending to hang one another with a jump rope, while younger children build obscure castles out of discarded bricks and vodka bottles that may have been dropped by a businessman on their way to work- or by anyone for that matter. Mounds of garbage are visible just beyond the treeline of this common area, being picked over by dogs with stomachs distended from malnutrition and neglect. A group of twenty somethings stand around together and take little notice when one of their peers throws a punch that lands squarely on the jaw of his girlfriend with a pop that startles a crowd of passers by a quarter of a block away. Beside an overflowing dumpster a car pulls up and drops off an ambiguous blue duffel bag to be picked up by another vehicle a few minutes later.

Across the street from that dumpster is Hope Church. The one place in town where people smile publicly. Led by a pastor who is drenched with the Holy Spirit and rooted in an unswerving integrity and good humor despite the threats on his life that have been increasing in intensity as of late, and supported by 48 individuals, most of whom are unemployed and have been abandoned by their friends for joining. You see, in Rayzan and most of Russia Orthodoxy reigns supreme having close ties to the state. There has been a resurgence of Russian nationalism as of late so that anything that is not pro-Orthodoxy is considered anti-Russian. And for the Baptist church- literally, a church of those who are baptized as opposed to the denomination as we know it- trying to offer the people a connection with God in a way that Orthodoxy cannot, this is very bad news. So what appears at first glance to be just another story of an inner-city church trying to make it becomes quickly tinged with the dark edge of persecution. In the days we were there, church windows were smashed by a white supremacy group who spray painted swastikas outside

their front door for embracing foreigners like us. Church members struggle to put food on their tables and keep the heat on in the winter because there is no such thing as extortion in Russia. And so the challenge of the church to reach out and share the gospel with a culture that is imploding with addiction that is killing their children and corruption that is driving them to poverty and exploding with escalating violence is multiplied. But so too is the sense of the urgency of their mission because it is evident to all that it is only the love of God that can transform their city- and it looks like the Holy Spirit has opted to share that love through them.

And so the question always before them is not so different from that which was before those first disciples so long ago who were left staring up into the sky after Christ's ascension and wondering what in the world comes next. Who were left looking at the broken world around them with the good news ringing in their ears, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" while the gospel imperative stretched out on a dangerous and terrifying path before them, "go, and make disciples of all nations." The question before all these disciples is how to translate faith in Jesus Christ to a culture that is predispositioned by years of abuse and neglect not to understand. How to teach a language of love to those who do not even share the same vocabulary. How to speak the good news of the gospel in a way that others will hear and recognize as their own when even such simple things as a smile get lost in translation somewhere in that thick and complex space between two people, let alone between a church and a culture, sometimes with devastating consequences. How to possibly find the words to speak that kind of love into that kind of need?

But there stood the promise of Jesus- just a few verses before our text today, who had ordered the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of his Father, "This," he had said, "Is what you have heard from me...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>1</sup> And then there was the experience. The winds of the Spirit ripping down from heaven and filling the hearts and lungs of the disciples and all believers gathered there so that they exhaled the story of God's power and love in a way that was unmistakable to the unbaptized ears now surrounding them. "And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered.... Amazed and astonished, they asked, "how is it that we hear (in) our own native language...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." We don't know what was said on that day. We only know what God did. And what God did was deliver the power that was promised for the work at hand by enabling the disciples to speak in a way that transcended the boundaries of their own capacities and knowledge in order to communicate the love of God in a way that they would never understand, through a strength that was not their own, granted by a Spirit that knows no language barrier, enacting a miracle of connectedness that defies logic and that transformed the community of faith and the world forever. That is the power of the Pentecost moment.

Actually, one of the most frightful mistakes we can make as a church is to isolate Pentecost to a single moment. Don't get me wrong, there was an outpouring of Spirit and tongues that to be sure, but it would be a great loss to the church to expect that the movement and momentum of that Spirit of understanding ended there. To assume that the miraculous work of God through

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<sup>1</sup>Acts 1:4-8.

those disciples that gathered together in anticipation of being used and renewed by the Holy Spirit ended at dusk that same day because I can assure you it most certainly did not. For while we did not witness a speaking in tongues in Russia we did experience Pentecost. For once we surrendered our illiteracy with the language, then the Spirit took over and began to speak. Drawing us together in fellowship with our Russian brothers and sisters through a language that was not our own. Knitting bonds of intimacy despite a chasm of difference in our experience through our common love for Christ that allowed deep truths about life and culture, and fear and faith, and love to be shared honestly. Communicating God's unmistakable power through our own hearts being actively transformed by the transforming hearts of our friends. And for all that is lost in translation for this little church in the midst of an emaciated and hostile world, through the work of that same Spirit of Pentecost and the tenacious willingness and faith of the believers gathered, despite what seems like a hopeless calling Hope Church stands as the most vibrant and fastest growing congregation in the region. Spinning off two new church developments through the leadership of their pastor and cultivating ministries on little to no budget that draw congregants and community members, the prisoner and the poor to the gospel of Jesus Christ from miles and worlds away.

I can't help but think that in some ways we are not so different from our sister church in Russia or the early church, or from any church for that matter for the questions before us remain the same as does our calling to share the good news of the gospel of love with a world that sometimes seems to speak another language entirely. As the body of Christ gathered today I think we understand the longing for Pentecost quite well for there is much about us as a church that is lost in translation to the world around us despite what we perceive to be our best efforts. It seems that in many ways we have tried to create our own sort of Pentecost- taken our confessional heritage to the extreme by passing around a whole lot of language and not nearly enough love. In a denomination in decline we have written a lot of letters, crafted a lot of statements, refined a few catchy phrases and have poured a lot of money into the market research in hopes of articulating something about ourselves that will open the ears and stir the hearts and spirits of the secular world, inciting in them a desire to come and join us. Because we somehow believe that by saying the right thing on issues and appeals, through carefully crafted definitions and by clearly defining the lines of division between ourselves that everyone will then understand that we are somehow offering something different than the rest of the world.

But part of the wisdom of missions abroad is that when all of the words that we depend on so heavily to define ourselves to each other and to draw like minded believers to our side are stripped away, we are left with one thing that we have in common that we know for sure, and that is Jesus Christ. And that is enough. Somehow being conversant in the language of Christ's love alone is enough to make the community of faith feel stronger than it has ever felt before even when you have no other common ground to stand on. And the church seems more vibrant because you are pressed to look for God's activity in it in new ways. Like the hearing that is more highly attuned when sight is taken away, when the language you possess within yourself is simply not sufficient, the Spirit prompts you to seek out the deeper connectedness that you are being called to with one another in Jesus Christ. And because you can never fully understand the intricacies of another's convictions, you are left only to celebrate and nourish only your common conviction in the Lord. And believe it or not, in that place of vulnerability and expectant hope, in

the waiting and watching for the way you will be used and renewed, when you are at a total loss for words, the Spirit opens your heart and empowers you to speak across the chasms that divide in the native language of love, creating understanding and stirring hearts and drawing the people together in love. And believe it or not, the church grows and not just because this is Pentecost, after all, but because love transforms. And people want to be a part of love. At First Presbyterian we have been given the opportunity to go out into the world as bi-lingual, no multi-lingual hearers and proclaimers of the word of God. Showing the denomination what can happen when you keep the centrality and unity of Christ as the primary issue platformed by your church. To show Charlotte our true mission through the name in which we share a cup of soup with a neighbor in need, or by which we welcome the visitor and invite them to draw near to the heart of the community of faith by surrendering our agendas for their acceptance. We have the opportunity to demonstrate that we really are offering something different than the rest of the world, by every interaction first to the prayer as to how the Spirit is moving you in every conversation and interaction to proclaim God's deeds of power in love in a way that no one can miss.

On our last day in Rayzan as we were leaving the church, one of those ladies from the kitchen who had watched with guarded interest and neutral expression as I fumbled through that first language lesson came up to our group with tears in her eyes, which startled me as we had not breathed a word to each other outside of 'thank you' and 'you are welcome' all week. She gave me a hug and offered the first smile I had seen from her since our arrival. Then she placed one hand over hear heart and laid the other one gently over mine. Not a word was exchanged but everything was understood. The language of God's love does not require a special vocabulary. It requires only an openness to the movement of the Pentecostal Spirit and a willing heart. It is time to cut through the complexity into the core of our faith in Jesus Christ and reclaim our call to be witnesses to his love to the ends of the earth. Amen.