

“Foreign Languages”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
May 27th, 2012 *Pentecost*

Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

‘The Holy Spirit took control of everyone,
and they began speaking whatever languages the Spirit let them speak.’

Acts 2:4

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the gift of human diversity which allows us to discover
the infinite variety of your Creation, and describe it
in vocabularies and dialects that have come and gone
and will do so in new languages yet to be.

And thank you for your changeless truth and love and mirth.

Amen

What a gift we had in having Maureen McCoy teach a class on the Spanish language
which just finished up and I’m hoping she will offer it again soon.

So, how many of us already know a ‘foreign language’?

How many of you know a ‘second language’, fluently enough
that you could live someplace where this would be the ‘native language’?

I learned French and Mandarin Chinese, conversational German and Korean,
bits and pieces of Japanese and Spanish and enough classic Greek and Hebrew
to translate with a dictionary.

I don’t think, however, that I could remember enough of any of them these days
where I could just go and live in some other land and get by,
as is, on my foreign language skills alone.

I travelled a lot while I was in the service and did use my knowledge
of these languages and found them helpful.

An acquaintance of mine, fluent in Chinese, was surprised to meet with hostility
when bargaining for a ticket.

It was my opinion that because of her appearance as a foreigner,
she bypassed the usual social customs and taboos of being Chinese,
so, it was disconcerting to barter with her because she looked like a stranger
but could speak and understand like one of them.

I, on the other hand, have found that if you know enough of a language to be cute,
this will have the effect of folks feeling sympathetic towards you and
offering to help with directions or whatever the case may be – in English.

Generally, I find that when we try to communicate with someone
of another culture – when we make the effort to speak their language,
it shows that person we respect them and their culture.

You may not know the customs of a place,
but common courtesy goes a long way to bridge the gap between people.

I feel bad that – for many of our young troops who’ve gone overseas in a time of war,
they do not have easy opportunities to meet the people there as they can be.

Willard, p.2

I love the Chinese language – I love its complex calligraphy and its simple grammar.

Chinese characters are as much an art form as they are symbols for ideas.

An example is the word for ‘good’ which is pronounced ‘hau’;

and its character combines the symbols for ‘woman’ and ‘child’ –
so, ‘woman’ with ‘child’ is ‘good’.

By the way, there are four kinds of written words or “characters” –

Literal pictures, symbolic designs, combinations linked to a sound
which can be combined with others for different meanings,
and then there are mistakes that stuck –
they kept getting copied by scribes until they were accepted.

Aren’t we impressed when someone uses a foreign word in their conversation
or when someone can even speak fluently in another language?

We may assign a certain mystique or even power to that word like ‘magical words’ –
and of course, the first words kids want to learn are the naughty ones.

Sometimes we give more meaning to a foreign word
than it deserves and which would otherwise be innocuous.

I remember seeing a young man in China wearing a T-shirt

that had a large phrase, written in Old English letters... “Auto Insurance” –
but that was amidst various, unrelated English words like “refrigerator”.

Imagine us doing the same thing.

So, when we wear clothing or jewelry with oriental characters,
we really ought to find out first what they mean before we put them on.

We like to think that English is a simple, practical language with words like
‘cut’, ‘stop’, and ‘hurry’ that get the idea across quickly and neatly –
a literal definition that sounds like what it means.

But English – like any language, can get complicated.

Some words have a combined quality of sound and rhythm – an ‘onomonopia’
that imitate the thing or action described like ‘buzz’ or ‘murmur’.

But then there are words with an ‘i’ before ‘e’ except after ‘c’ –

or when the word happens to be, ‘their’, t-h-e-i-r,
and are we talking about the word ‘their’ – as in ‘belonging to them’
or ‘there’ – as in ‘over there’?

And remember the Abbott & Costello routine ‘Who’s on first?’ –
except at our Governing Board meetings

when the WHO ministry team is on after Missions.

And just what is a ‘Diaconate’?

See? Even English has its complications.

Willard, p.3

But the languages of some cultures – like Native American languages, can have a quality that goes beyond a literal definition .

In a Louis L'Amour western – which became a John Wayne movie called, “Hondo”, there is an excellent example of such words that have a deeper meaning.

In a conversation about his late wife who was an Apache – and who was beloved, the title character is asked about the meaning of her name, Destarte...

“You can't say it except in Mescalero.

It means Morning, but that isn't what it means, either.

Indian words are more than just that.

They also mean the feel and sound of the name.

It means like Crack of Dawn.

The first bronze light that makes the buttes stand out against the gray desert.

It means the first sound you hear of a brook curling over some rocks – some trout jumping and a beaver crooning.

It means the sound a stallion makes when he whistles at some mares just as the first puff of wind kicks up at daybreak.

It means like you get up in the first light and you and her go out of the wickiup, where it smells smoky and private and just you and her,

and kind of safe with just the two of you there, and you stand outside and smell the first bite of the wind coming down from the high divide and promising the first snowfall.

Well, you can't say what it means in English.

Anyway, that was her name. Destarte.”

Just as some Native American words pack a lot of meaning like that example, others can be quite long.

Consider this Indian name for a certain lake in Massachusetts...

Chargoggagogg-manchauggagogg-chaubunagungamaugg.

is believed to be translated like this:

“You fish on your side, I fish on my side, and nobody fishes in the middle”, OK?

Let's go back to the woman's name, ‘Destarte’ for a moment.

That is an example of a word that has a qualitative meaning in addition to a literal definition.

The name of God in Hebrew has the root word meaning of ‘To Be’ and YHWH is often translated as “The One Who Is” – or “I Am That I Am That I Will Be”.

And Jesus' name combines this personal name of God with the concept of salvation – “I Am The One Who Saves”.

Willard, p.4

Muslims refer to God as “Allah” – two syllables that seem to combine
“El” – the ancient word for God, and
“Yah” – as a shortened reference to YHWH.

Both of these words for God were used by the Jewish people
for personal names like “Elijah” being one example.

Judaism also have a word for the Spirit of God as “Shekhinah” –
a feminine word whose root meaning is “Dwelling”
as in “the indwelling presence of God” which was experienced
in the Tabernacle of Exodus and the Temple of Jerusalem,
and even when God is encountered in a place of desolation.

Humanity has many names for God,
but there is a reality that is independent of the labels we give to it.
And when people are of a spirit of goodwill,
then all these names are acceptable and meaningful,
though never quite enough.

The Chinese spiritual tradition of “Taoism” teaches about the “Tao” –
literally the “Way”, but like the name of God
and even the woman’s name, “Destarte”,
a literal interpretation is not enough.

The very first chapter of the Tao De Ching – the sacred text of Taoism, says:

*The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth
The named is the mother of myriad things
Thus, constantly without desire, one observes its essence
Constantly with desire, one observes its manifestations
These two emerge together
but differ in name
The unity is said to be the mystery
Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders*

<http://www.taoism.net/ttc/complete.htm>

And so we can find truth in others’ words of faith by being open to hear it
and also find that – in the process, the truth of our beliefs is affirmed, too.
Just like Pastor John Robinson’s words of encouragement to the Pilgrims
to be open to the truth by whatever instrument God would use to send it.
And Jesus himself said that everything that belongs to God,
all that is worthy, beautiful, resilient belongs to him, too.

Let me close with a song in Latin – and see if you can guess what it means...

*Veni, creator Spiritus mentes tuorum visita,
Imple superna gratia, quae tu creasti pectora.
Amen*

*Acts 2:1-21 is the great story of Pentecost- the Festival of the First Harvest
that became synonymous with the birth of the Christian Church
as a faith community...*

2:1 On the day of Pentecost

all the Lord's followers were together in one place.

2 Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind!

It filled the house where they were meeting.

3 Then they saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions,
and a tongue came and settled on each person there.

4 The Holy Spirit took control of everyone,

and they began speaking whatever languages the Spirit let them speak.

5 Many religious Jews from every country in the world
were living in Jerusalem.

6 And when they heard this noise, a crowd gathered.

But they were surprised, because they were hearing everything
in their own languages.

7 They were excited and amazed, and said:

Don't all these who are speaking come from Galilee?

8 Then why do we hear them speaking our very own languages?

9 Some of us are from Parthia, Media, and Elam.

Others are from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia,

10 Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya near Cyrene, Rome,

11 Crete, and Arabia.

Some of us were born Jews,

and others of us have chosen to be Jews.

Yet we all hear them using our own languages

to tell the wonderful things God has done.

12 Everyone was excited and confused.

Some of them even kept asking each other,

"What does all this mean?"

13 Others made fun of the Lord's followers and said,

"They are drunk."

14 Peter stood with the eleven apostles

and spoke in a loud and clear voice to the crowd:

Friends and everyone else living in Jerusalem,

listen carefully to what I have to say!

15 You are wrong to think that these people are drunk.

After all, it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

16 But this is what God had the prophet Joel say,

17 “When the last days come,

I will give my Spirit to everyone.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young men will see visions,

and your old men will have dreams.

18 In those days I will give my Spirit to my servants,

both men and women, and they will prophesy.

19 I will work miracles in the sky above

and wonders on the earth below.

There will be blood and fire and clouds of smoke.

20 The sun will turn dark, and the moon will be as red as blood

before the great and wonderful day of the Lord appears.

21 Then the Lord will save everyone who asks for his help.”

Inspired by John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

In this text, Jesus tells his disciples to prepare for the arrival of the “Paraclete” – which is sometimes translated as the “Counselor”, the “Advocate”, or the “Comforter” – manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Another interpretation of this word – when broken into its parts, literally means ‘Beside Caller’ which could even be thought to mean “Cheerleader”, “Coach”, or “Guide”.

[Jesus said,]

‘When the Spiritual Guide comes –
whom I will send to you from the Creator, the Beloved Guardian,
that one will bear witness about me
through the Spirit of truth which proceeds from the Creator.
And you will also bear witness
because you were with me from the beginning.

I didn’t tell you these things before because I have been with you,
but soon I will be leaving to go to the One who sent me.

Now, none of you are asking me,
“Where are you going?”

It’s because I am saying these things to you now
and your hearts are filled with grief.

But I tell you the truth, it is best for you that I go away.
For if I don’t go away, the Guide won’t be able to come to you.

Yet if I am out of the way, I will be able to send that one to you
who will come to hold the world accountable
concerning selfish indulgence and righteousness and judgment.

Concerning selfish indulgence,
because the world doesn’t trust me yet.

Concerning righteousness,
because I am going to the Creator and won’t be around as your example.

Concerning judgment,
because the tyrants of this world will be held to account.

I still have many things I want to tell you,
but you can’t bear to hear them now.

Yet when the Guide comes, the Spirit of truth will guide you into all that is true.
For the Guide will not speak about personal agenda,
but will tell about what is heard and announce what is to come.

That one will glorify me by receiving me
and proclaiming this to you – All things of the Creator are mine, too.
Therefore, the one who receives me will proclaim this to you.’