

God's Love Language By the Rev. Salying Wong

A Japanese man tells White-American colleague he is in trouble with his wife. He says, "This morning, my wife woke before me to set out my clothes, prepare my lunch, and make me breakfast. When she served my tea, she poured it to the rim." The Japanese man gave a big sigh. The American man says, "I'm missing something. Sounds like you're a lucky man." The Japanese man says, "My wife poured the tea to the rim. It means she's mad at me. Now I have to figure out what I did."

High-context, low text. People who study culture and languages would say some languages are high-context, low text—which Japanese and Chinese would fall under. It is when you don't say much (low text), but the messages are passed along in non-verbal ways. What the Japanese man experienced, I would understand. It would be an insult to pour tea so high that when someone handles it, they can spill on themselves. You only did it when you disrespect them in some way.

When I started learning American English, it was more than learning how to speak, how to read, how to pronounce. You can get all that and still not really grasp the language because language is embedded in culture. When I learned that anthropologists designated American English as high text, low context, something crystallized in me: All those times I poured the tea to rim for certain people, they never got what I was "saying". American English tends to be direct. If things are unclear, more words tend to follow. Language here is often seen as words rather than messages delivered through non-verbal signals. Of course, across our country there are cultural pockets, where some use more words than others. Consider the difference between someone from the Midwest and someone from the South. Even here, you can see a divide between high-context, low-text and high-text and low-context. Even here, you might need a translator.

I think about the Pentecost scene in the Book of Acts. The people who gathered at this extraordinary scene were all Jews. But, they were diasporic. That is, they lived in all parts of the Roman Empire. Acts tells us that they were observant Jews making a pilgrimage for a festival. They all probably spoke Hebrew, their religious language. But, when they heard their native land's language, that's when they were amazed. I wonder what it felt like to hear one's native language away from one's home? If you've ever traveled to a foreign land and heard your own language coming back to you, what is the feeling you get?

Often in church on Pentecost, you would hear one of the readings read in multiple languages—even if the only person who understood some of the languages was the speaker. But for me, the point of Pentecost is that those who felt out of place heard their own language. The Pentecost event required not just the speaker, but the hearer.

This reminds of another story—this time set in Australia. When the colonizers were holding a court case to adjudicate whether a certain patch of land belonged to a aboriginal tribe or to the government. A defendant called “the Mute”, whose land was being taken away, was called forward to the stand. Suddenly, he started talking. The judge interrupted and said, “I was told this man was a mute.” The defense said, “Your honor, he is called “the Mute”, not because he can't talk. He is the last of his tribe to speak his language—his tribe was slaughtered by the colonialists. He is called mute because no one can understand him. He is mute because he cannot have anyone ever understand him.”

Think about that. Think about what it would feel like to have no one understand you. Sometimes, it can feel like that even when you share the same language. But, imagine if it were impossible. The isolation would be worse than death. If you want to annihilate a culture, first destroy its language. This is a very powerful tool of destruction. I heard on the radio that today, in the US, there are only 50 people living who can speak the First People's language of Seneca. This and other native languages were systematically targeted for destruction, especially in the forced boarding schools for the Indians. Children were torn from their families

and beaten when they spoke their native tongue. They could only speak English. The church has much repentance and restitution to make for being part of the engine for this abuse.

This is so far from the beauty of what happened at the first Pentecost, where those who were out-of-place got to hear their own native tongue, to feel at home away from home. What does it mean about the nature of being church as a gathering where one feels home away from home? How would we notice the difference between *imposition* and *invitation*? Is the church's message, "Come be like us; come speak like us?" Or is it, "How can we understand one another better? Please teach us your language; show us what it feels like to be at home." In first century Palestine, the givenness of life was that there would be walls of hostility that divided tribes. Unfortunately, we live in similar times. There is so much hostility in our nation. So much violence. We have become fluent in the language of guns. Our political climate puts walls of hostility between us. There is violence in our speech and in our hearts. We need the refreshing Spirit of Pentecost to descend upon us again, to teach us to speak God's love language, a language that dismantles the walls of hostility we think are so durable.

Pentecost means that God has poured God's Spirit upon us, in such a downpour that the walls of hostility and division crumble under its power. We are that stream of the Spirit poured down over 2000 years ago, to deliver peace and goodwill. The Spirit emboldens us to climb across walls of hostility, to listen deeply, to learn another's language. At Pentecost, may we all gain fluency in God's love language.