

Day of Pentecost
YA 2021

A Revolution of the Intimate
By the Rev. Salying Wong

When I was in third grade, I had two best friends, Oralia and Rebecca. Oralia was Mexican-American and Rebecca was African American. One day, while standing in line for lunch, Oralia and I talked about our home language. Oralia said she spoke Spanish at home; I told her I spoke Chinese at home. We asked Rebecca what language she spoke at home. She said, “English!” Oralia and I both looked at her, incredulous. I said, “What! You speak English at school and go home and speak English there. You must be exhausted.”

For Oralia and me, English was not the intimate language. It was the language of the sphere that was foreign to us. It was a chore to speak it. Our native tongue was the language of intimacy. It was a home, a culture, a taste, a touch.

“To speak a language is to speak a people,” says the theologian Willie Jennings. He says that what’s happening in Acts on this day of Pentecost is nothing but a revolution of the intimate. The languages of Pentecost are not ecstatic and indecipherable, but completely understandable. On that day, Jews from all over the diaspora—Jews who grew up in Parthia, Medea, Elam, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, Rome, Crete and Arabia—heard their home language. Since they were Jews, they probably all spoke Hebrew. They would have done just fine communicating with the apostles and all they upon whom the Spirit fell in Hebrew. But instead, when the Spirit fell upon them, they spoke the home language of each. They who had traveled so far to be in Jerusalem for their pilgrimage, suddenly felt the collapse of space. Home and Israel were in one place.

And how it must have felt to hear their home language. Suddenly, they could taste the family meal and smell the land of their childhoods; their most intimate memories and intimate desires rushed upon them like the wind. I imagine not only amazement, but comfort and relaxation. No longer was the land they were traveling in so arduous. The amazement was that these Jews of Israel who spoke their home language have now walked inside their homes, know their people. And could it be, now what they hear is that they love them? As for those who spoke in all sorts of languages, what did they say? Perhaps some of the apostles said, "Ah, your mother's beef stew, it is beyond delicious. I wish we could share a bowl together." Since the Spirit was the instigator, the words they spoke joined them: we belong to each other; we can know each other; we are all loved by the same God.

This Pentecost scene is the joining of Israel to Israel, people of Jerusalem to the diaspora. When we say that the church was created on Pentecost, what we mean is that the Spirit is creating a people across boundaries. (No one at this point is constructing a building.) The Spirit breaks even the boundary of language, which can be an immense separator. Normally, it takes a long time to learn a language. In order to learn it, really learn it, you must love it. Here the Spirit jumps across time, jumps across space to indicate the immense trajectory of her desires—to make a new people from all walks of life.

Indeed, this day of Pentecost poises the nascent church for an expansion. The people the Spirit wishes to create will immediately include more than diaspora. Phillip will fly to an Ethiopian eunuch, who might be a Jew, but is outside of Israel's purity codes and outside of social gender norms. Eventually, the mind-blowing move that wasn't yet imagined on that day, will be the Spirit taking Peter to the home of Centurion for a second Pentecost. Here, the Spirit will fall on gentiles and they will speak the intimate language of those present. This time, Peter will hear his own home language and the Gentile will be able to walk into his home the way he will walk into the Centurion's. They will all be baptized into the household of Christ. Yes, Pentecost is nothing but a revolution of the intimate.

When we consider that the Spirit has created a people today and we call it the church, we must consider this revolution of the intimate as we strive to be church. We, on the vestry, have been having conversations about how to build connections with our neighbors. We consider our first steps. We are good at coming up with programmatic ideas. Yet, what I really want us to do is consider something much more basic. I want us to tell the story of our faith to another person. I want us to ask about the faith story of another person. These are most intimate acts. To tell your story is to invite someone into your life; to listen to another story, really listen, is to walk into their life. The act of telling and the act of listening takes vulnerability. It can make us giddy, like falling in love.

We need a revolution of the intimate again. The amazing thing is that it is so simple. Tell the story of your faith; listen to another person's story. Sometimes we don't even know our story. Write it down today: What love story do you have with Jesus? You do not have to convince anyone of anything; you are only witnessing from where you stand. Sometimes people ask me when we are going to start making connections with our neighbors. Well, you each can start now. You don't have to join a committee or be on a task force. Do the most revolutionary thing: share the story of your faith with someone today. Nearly anyone at any age can do this. And so it is true:

God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

Everyone, including you.