

NATIVE LANGUAGE

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Acts 2:1-17

This week, a man in New York City was captured on video in what can only be described as a hate-filled, racist tirade. The video has been posted and viewed by millions of people.

The story¹ is that this man was in a deli in Manhattan to buy lunch. A regular customer of this deli is a woman named Emily Serrano. Because she frequents the deli, she has gotten to know one of the employees and they will converse in English or in Spanish. Emily was in line at noon on Tuesday and the customer in front of her placed their order in Spanish. Emily did the same. This appeared to agitate the customer behind her who exploded into a verbal tirade against the workers. Emily took out her phone and began filming. After yelling at the workers for not speaking English, the man started yelling at the manager saying, “Every person I listen to: He spoke it, he spoke it, she’s speaking it,” the man declares, turning around and pointing at various people in the restaurant. “This is America! If you intend to be running a place in midtown Manhattan, your staff better be speaking to customers in English.” The man then threatened to contact immigration officials because he guessed these people were undocumented. He then turned to Ms Sarrano who was filming and made a personal remark about her weight and left.

The video was posted and the man was quickly identified as Aaron Schlossberg, age 44, an attorney in Manhattan whose office is just a few doors down from the restaurant. Ironically, on his business website, Mr. Schlossberg states that he is fluent in Spanish.

Contrary to popular belief, English is not the official language of the United States. The US does not have an official language. Thirty-one states do designate English as their language for official matters to one degree or another. For example, in Kentucky, agricultural labels are required to be written in English. Mostly, it is a practical matter. In Massachusetts, if you are a licensed acupuncturist, then your license must be completed in English. I imagine this came about because members of the acupuncturist union requested to fill out their licenses in Chinese and the clerks at the county licensing offices said no. Hawaii recognizes English and Hawaiian. Alaska recognizes English plus a number of indigenous languages.

There is a huge difference between English-official legislation and English-only legislation. There are no laws on the books that require that English is to be the

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/05/16/my-next-call-is-to-ice-watch-a-man-wig-out-because-workers-spoke-spanish-at-a-manhattan-deli/?utm_term=.ee8e7076a143

only language of the land. That is good because there are close to 400 separate languages spoken in this country. Around the world, there are an estimated 6,500 living languages. Half of these languages are endangered and are expected to be extinct by the end of the century. In southern Mexico, in the state of Tabasco, there is a language known as Ayapaneco. It is an ancient, indigenous language that predates the Spanish conquest. There are only two people left who are able to converse fluently and they are not on speaking terms.²

It was wrong of Mr. Schlossberg to shout at the workers in a deli for speaking Spanish. If you are not happy with the laws of the land, there are acceptable ways to effect legislative change. This is not one of them.

Our scripture reading today is the story of Pentecost. This event is considered to be the birth of the church.

The book of Acts picks up with the resurrection of Jesus. Following his resurrection, Jesus spends time with his disciples teaching them more about the kingdom of God before he ascends into heaven. As he ascends, he instructs his followers to wait together in Jerusalem. So they do.

Pentecost did not originate with the Christian church. It is an ancient Jewish festival that commemorates the giving of the Law from God to the people. It is celebrated fifty days after Passover (hence the name pente-cost) to correspond with the tradition that Moses received the Ten Commandments fifty days after the Exodus.

So, on the day of this festival of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus are gathered together in the upstairs rented room when something happens. It is kind of hard to explain. There is a loud, chaotic noise like an airplane flying low over your house at the same time that a freight train is passing by while both your neighbors mow their lawns. The scripture describes it as being *like the rush of a violent wind*. This noise fills the house.

Then, in addition to the noise, objects appear among the people. These objects look like the flames of a fire and they are all around them and each of these flames rests on each person there. What these people see and hear in that room are the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Each person in the room is filled with the Holy Spirit. As John the Baptist said about Jesus, *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire* (Luke 3:16). This is their baptism. One immediate result of their being filled with the Spirit is that each is given the ability to speak in a new language.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/13/mexico-language-ayapaneco-dying-out>

Because it is Pentecost—which at the time was major Jewish festival—Jews from all over the have convened on Jerusalem to worship and celebrate. These people have traveled from different lands where they speak different languages. The turbulent sound emanating from the house where the disciples are gathered attracts a lot of attention and a crowd congregates around the house. They are curious—what is creating this racket? As the disciples in the house pour out into the street, the crowd is confused and astonished because they are able to understand these disciples in their own native languages. Amazed, they ask, *Aren't these people Galileans? How is that we understand them?* Then, we are the reader, are provided this long list of peoples and nations, supposedly representing each group in the crowd. The people understand that the disciples are speaking about God and God's deeds of power. Some in the crowd, however, denounce the disciples saying that they are not speaking in any language, but that are simply babbling after drinking too much cheap wine.

Peter steps forward and takes control of the situation. He addresses the crowd saying that the disciples are not drunk because for one thing it is only 9:00 a.m. Peter places the recent events in context by quoting the book of Joel where Joel foretells of that day when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. On that day, there will be prophesying, and dreams, and visions. When that day comes, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Peter goes on to preach the story of Jesus and how Jesus is part of God's great plan for all. The crowd responds to Peter asking what they can do. Peter tells them, *Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* We are told that 3000 people were baptized that day. And the community of believers grows and the people share their belongings and give to those who are in need. They worship and eat together and give praise to God. The church is born.

The Holy Spirit is powerful. It moves through us, connecting us to each other and to God. It inspires us and pushes us; it guides and directs us in the ways of God. The Holy Spirit is God with us.

So, it is interesting to see in the Pentecost story how the very first thing the followers of Jesus do when filled with the Spirit is to speak in other languages, other tongues. Maybe that is what the occasion demanded—the ability to witness to all those people from foreign lands, to share with them the story of Jesus and the power of God, to offer them the way of salvation. This is the reverse of the story of Babel. At Babel, God scattered the people by giving them different languages. At Pentecost, God uses language to bring them together.

As Christians today, when do we need the ability to speak to others in their native language? The obvious answer is when we reach out to refugees and

immigrants to assist them in their journey through our land. We can demonstrate God's love if we can speak kinds words they can understand.

Following the incident in the deli in New York, a reporter spoke to one of the employees who was present. This man's name is Oscar Villanueva and he is Honduran. He told the reporter that Schlossberg called them names. Villanueva said, "He heard us speak Spanish and started yelling (names I can't repeat). He said we have to speak English. He started saying a lot of ugly words... We felt really bad, humiliated." The bible is not silent on this point. The book of Exodus is clear when it says, *You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt* (Exodus 22:21).

Being able to share the Good News of God's love with those from other lands is not the only way we can utilize the language of the Holy Spirit. There are also those who are lost in their own personal wilderness. There are those who are lost in the land of addictions, or illness, or poverty, or oppression. Does God desire that we go to the addict and scream at them and humiliate them? Or, has the Holy Spirit armed us with the dreams and visions that speak a different language? Does the Holy Spirit give us a language of prophesy so that we may speak to those mired in poverty, or illness, or despair?

My question to you is this: Are we speaking this language?

The birth of the church is the beginning of a new way of living, a new way of speaking. Let us go from this room out into the streets and share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone in their native language.