

# “Now You’re Speaking My Language”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Gregory Cummins  
to the congregation at  
Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver  
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## **Scripture: Genesis 11: 1-9 and Acts 2: 1-12**

Born in the Netherlands, Alida immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960’s. When she came to Denver when you talk to her that she’d rather be speaking Dutch. I get to see Alida once or twice a year, when representatives from the church bring communion to her, and others, who can no longer get here on Sundays.

And the highpoint, for me, of visiting Alida, is asking her to close communion by praying the Lord’s Prayer in her native tongue. She’s always shy about it at first, worried she’ll mess up and forget the words. At which point, we remind her that the rest of us will have *no* way of knowing this.

We hold hands around her old, oak, kitchen table, bow our heads, and almost whispering, Alida opens us to the presence of the Holy as powerfully as any priest or Pope ever could, even though we don’t understand a word she’s saying.

Our first reading this morning, from the Book of Genesis, is about language. It begins, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.”

It’s a fascinating story, about the power of words, and the arrogance that comes with power. God, in the story, betrays a level of insecurity unbecoming a deity. And unwilling to have humanity poking its head in his neighborhood with their tower to the heavens, God disrupts their plans, not by fire; nor by flood. But by language.

The word Babel is a play on the Hebrew word ‘balal’, meaning ‘to confuse’. God confused their language.

And who among us has not experienced the confusion that language can cause. I remember trying to navigate an airport in Spain last year. Up to that point, our guide had always been by my side and I could sit back in blissful ignorance until he figured out where to go. But now, on my own, and beginning to panic, I felt first-hand just how great a barrier language can be.

I remember another time, at a pub in Scotland, having a conversation with someone, ostensibly in the *shared* tongue of our native English. But his accent was so strong, that no matter how intently I watched his lips move... I swore he could not be speaking English. Whether that second pint of Guinness was helping or hurting...I can't say for sure.

So the story has it right. Language can confuse. It can scatter, frustrate. Language can be a barrier so great as to evoke fear and mistrust. It can cause misunderstandings, lead to arguments, and no doubt a few wars have even started over nuances lost in translation.

And so we can appreciate the implication in the story, that the different languages of the world are the result of a kind of cosmic punishment; a penalty for our arrogance and overreach. And we might reasonably long to return to the days when "the whole earth had one language and the same words."

But if all this is something to regret, what then of Alida and her whispered invocation? For while it was true that praying in a foreign language created a barrier to understanding. Was it not also true that because we couldn't understand Alida's words, we were left freed to understand her prayer in a whole new way?

Different languages can divide us. But they can also enrich us. They can close us down, and they can open us up to new possibilities. And if this is true of language, isn't it also true of all kinds of differences?

I would wager that for many of us, the *reason* we love to travel is to experience the richness of what is different and new to us. It's exciting, interesting, and makes us better people to bump up against what is strange to us.

And at the same time we *know*, when we travel, many of those same interesting differences are going to test our patience to the limit. What people eat, when they eat, what side of the road they drive on, how their hotel faucets work...can all be fascinating - and *exasperating*.

Differences can bring out our best...and our worst.

But increasingly, we don't need to plan a trip to Thailand to experience people who are different from us. The world is getting smaller, quickly, and instead of needing to seek out diversity... diversity is coming to us, ready for it or not.

The journalist, David Brooks, who I think is doing some of the bravest and most insightful social analysis around, wrote an article not long ago suggesting there are "four big forces coursing through modern societies". He names global migration, economic globalization, the Internet, and a culture of autonomy.

And he argues that all of these have been enormously liberating to us, as *individuals*. Many of us have greater freedom of movement, vastly more access to information and ideas, and we can live and work and interact with a greater number of people in a wider sphere of influence than ever before.

But all of this cross fertilization and creative diversity, Brooks points out, is also proving to be hugely challenging to our sense of identity and it is stretching our social fabric to its limits. Or to my point today, we are experiencing the gift and the challenge of unavoidable *difference*.

([http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/how-covenants-make-us.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/how-covenants-make-us.html?_r=0))

Of all the complex issues we face in our world, the question of how we will deal with the growing reality of ‘difference’ – differences in lifestyle, in belief, in economic status - may well be *the* issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We stand at the tower of Babel, and the cacophony of different voices in our world is growing louder and closer every day. How we will deal with those differences – whether we will see them as threat or as opportunity - may, as much as anything else, determine our fate.

And to help us find our way forward, we would do well to look backward – to the day of Pentecost. Pentecost, meaning 50, celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses, traditionally thought to be 50 days after Passover. So as we know the story from the Book of Acts, Jews from near and far had gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival.

The first Christians were gathered there too. Of course they didn’t call themselves ‘Christians’ yet. They still had a decision to make – was this a Jewish movement? Or something larger? If non-Jews wanted to be a part of the movement, did they first need to convert to Judaism? Did they need to eat like Jews? Dress according to Jewish law? Would the men need to be circumcised? These were real and painful questions (sorry, couldn’t help it), and how they answered them would take them in vastly different directions.

And on that Pentecost morning, 50 days after the Passover in which Jesus had been crucified, something happened – something wonderful, that helped them make that decision. A rush of wind filled the house where the early followers of Jesus had gathered. And tongues, of fire, rested upon them. And they began to *speak*...in other languages.

With all the commotion, a crowd gathered around them. Parthians and Elamites; Mesopotamians and Egyptians. It was a collection of people as diverse and different as any we have today. And suddenly they found they could understand what the Christians were saying – in their *own* language.

“How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” They asked. You see, the point we must not miss here is that God’s Spirit did not equip the crowd to hear the Gospel in the language of the Christians. The Spirit equipped the Christians to speak in the many languages of the crowd. “And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does it mean?’”

What it means, I believe, is that from the very beginning, from the Christian Church’s first birthday, we, as Christians, have been asked to meet people where *they* are, rather than expect them to meet us where *we* are. We must be willing to speak in *their* language... not insist that they speak ours.

The early church eventually decided this would not just be a Jewish movement. They decided that when met with difference, the *Christian* response was to accommodate, to compromise, to

be willing to change. They came to understand that such compromise was an act of love, of service, of hospitality. And that it was an act of faith to trust that their God could work in different ways, in different places, with different people. And that decision changed the course of history.

As our world now faces increasing difference and diversity, we have choices to make as well. Are we willing to bear the challenges and frustrations of the increasing diversity around us? Or will we insist that others speak our language; and that *they* must be the ones to change?

This is a key question in our world right now, and, I think, a key question in our country, as we approach the most important election in decades. The rise of Donald Trump has been a wake up call. Many in our country feel threatened by the challenges and very real difficulties of our increasingly diverse world.

From gay marriage, to immigration, to women entering traditionally male roles, to the rising voice of faith traditions beyond Christianity, to the insistence that black lives matter... the social fabric of our country is being stretched into new shapes, and for many people, the difficulties of difference feel like too high a price to pay. And perhaps we can all feel some compassion for those who long for simpler days, and who just wish it would all go away.

This is what Donald Trump does so well – he promises to make differences go away. He promises to make the complex issues of immigration disappear behind a 12 foot wall. He promises to take away the threat of those who are terrorizing our world in the name of Islam, by barring Muslims from entering the country. He has not yet found a way to bar women from this country, but his demeaning treatment of them makes clear he would prefer their return to the second class status of a time long past. Differences of opinion are met with insults and bullying.

I would not typically call out a politician so directly, but these are not typical times. And Donald Trump is not a typical candidate. I'm worried for our country. And I know many of you would say we have plenty to worry about with Hillary in the White House, and that may be. But this is something of a whole different magnitude. The popularity of Donald Trump is, I think, a sign of how weary many people are of navigating this world that has grown so complex so quickly.

And I can appreciate this fatigue. And I long sometimes too, for simpler times. But the fact is, the days when the “whole earth had one language and the same words” are long gone. Nor were those times ever as simple as we imagine.

There is only one way forward now. We will either learn to live together with those who are different from us, or together we will be scattered like the crowds of Babel.

It is time for those of us who call ourselves Christian to remember our roots. To remember our Pentecost calling. We are better than this. This country is better than this. And now is the time to stand together and declare that our differences, as challenging as they may be... make us stronger; they make us more resilient, and they make us more beautiful. Now is the time to join our hands around the table, bow our heads, and listen for the Gospel in the language of the other.

And to hear in that language, not a problem to be eliminated, but a gift to be celebrated.