

Narrative Lectionary: Speaking the Language God Gives You!

Confirmation Sunday, May 20, 2018

I found this on a sports blog the other day by a writer named Gavriel Wilkins: “Under the direction of general manager Daryl Morey, Houston has managed to exploit squads by seeking to run the floor, create layups and letting heaps of 3-pointers fly with the help of Chris Paul and lead star James Harden. In an era where the majority of the league works hard to create opportunities through countless actions, the Rockets allow both Harden and Paul to establish chances out in isolation, to take advantage of mismatches and triggered switches from opposing teams.

Meanwhile, floor-spacers and shooters such as Trevor Ariza, P.J. Tucker, Ryan Anderson and Luc Mbah a Moute stand around the perimeter and serve as on-court spectators with arguably the best seat in the house.”

If you don't know what I'm talking about, it's NBA basketball, and a certain style of basketball called iso-ball that the Houston Rockets play. Brandon, the eighth-grader who is affirming his baptism today loves sports, and I know he understood everything I just said. Brandon speaks basketball, and lacrosse, and baseball, and football. He knows the language of sports.

I know some sports, and I also speak some “music.” I can talk about diminished chords and transposing keys and flatted fifths and going to the bridge and finding my way to the coda. I speak some music. Matt over there at the piano is fluent in the language of music.

Sierra, our new Youth Ministry Coordinator, is starting to meet with our youth once a week. And she's thinking that one of the Tuesdays they get together, she'll have an intergenerational meeting where youth teach the adults something: maybe it'll be the language of technology, and adults will share the language of something they know: maybe the language of baking or auto mechanics.

If we are going to share the love of God we know in Jesus with this world, we need to find the language that people can understand. And we need some language lessons from the Holy Spirit. Jesus had said to his followers, I'm going away, but I'm leaving you here to do my work, to be my hands and feet and voice. But you're going to need to speak the right language to people. People need to hear about me in a way they can understand. So forty days after the resurrection, he says, Go wait in Jerusalem, because I'm going to send you the Holy Spirit. No longer will God's

power just be available to certain people at certain times; I'm going to unleash my power on all of the people of God.

So on this particular day, Jews from all over the known world had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, celebrating the giving of the law. It was originally a harvest festival. And by the way, in Leviticus when this festival was set up, Moses commanded the people to leave some grain on the edges of the field; to leave some harvested grain in the field so that the poor of the land would have something to eat. The people of Israel were always reminded to care for their neighbor.

So God's power in the Holy Spirit came upon these 120 followers of Jesus. They began to speak in the languages of the people who had gathered from all over the known world.

And here's what's beautiful. God doesn't create one universal language for them all to understand. Each of these people heard the gospel in his or her own language. God doesn't make everybody the same. Unity is found in the midst of diversity. Their language, their culture is respected. You get to be you, loved and valued by God, as God created you to be. God wants to love you in a language you can understand. And it must have been a crazy scene. Luke tries to describe it. It was like tongues of fire resting on everybody's head. Who knows what that meant? It was like the wind rushed into the room. And God helped each visitor to Jerusalem understand the news about Jesus in his or her own language.

And what were the disciples speaking about? People were hearing stories of God's deeds of power, and most specifically, about God raising Jesus from the dead. These disciples had stories to tell about what God was up to!

Peter could say to people: I never could get it right. I denied Jesus at his time of greatest need. But you know what? He forgave me, and gave me a job to do. And Peter says, You too have been forgiven, whatever you've done. God wants to be in relationship with you. They pointed to the power of God at work in their lives in a language people could understand. They told about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and they told about resurrection in their own lives. Maybe they were saying, When you think that all possibilities are gone, that you're down to your last hope, think again, because if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then surely God can do wonders in your life.

How do we speak in a language so that people can really hear that God is crazy about them; that God wants wholeness and peace and reconciliation for them? I read this in a church newsletter a number of years ago: “How many languages do you speak? Kiswahili? Spanish? Russian? Japanese? Computer-ese? E-mail-ese? Internet-ese? Can you speak sign language? Can you speak with those with special needs?”

“Do you speak youth? Can you speak with different generations? Do you know the language of the poor? Do you know how to speak with those who have great wealth? Do you know how to speak the language of art? Music? Rhythm? Dance? Sculpture? Photography? Poetry?”

“How about the language of justice, compassion, and mercy? Mowing? Cleaning? Cooking? Sewing? Teaching? Listening? Helping? Advocacy? Being there?”

And then the writer says, “Celebrate your gifts from the Spirit! For love’s sake and for God’s glory share your languages!” Let me share with you some other languages we need to become fluent in. We need to be fluent in the language of welcome. I heard the story the other day of two Christian girls, Katrina and Rhonda, who made a two-week commitment to ask the question, What would Jesus do? before they did anything. The first major test came on the very first day. Here’s what Katrina said: “A student named Deb entered the lunchroom, wearing dark blue knee socks, with a pink skirt, and an amusement-park t-shirt. She was looking for a place to sit. Since she usually dominated every conversation and sprayed people with her food while she ate, she wasn’t a popular lunch companion.

“I tried not to look at her, but her eye caught mine. What would Jesus do? I silently asked myself. I don’t want to do what Jesus would do, I argued. I forced myself to say, Would you like to sit here? I’d like to say I discovered some hidden charm and talents in Deb and we became friends, but that wasn’t the case. Rhonda was much more gracious than I was, steering the conversation to include Deb and giving me a kick under the table to let me know that Jesus would be a little more welcoming than I was being.”

Is that a big deal, a major step in speaking the language of love and welcome? Well, if you’re a seventh grader it’s a huge deal. The universe changed a little that day because two girls spoke the language of welcome, of hospitality. And Jesus was whispering, Well done. Way to go. It’s as if you welcomed me.

Here's another language that Jesus calls us to speak: the language of involvement. Donald Driver retired after a career as a wide-receiver with the Green Bay Packers in 2013. He was drafted in the seventh round, the last round, and he ended up with more receptions, more yardage, more touchdowns than a whole bunch of players drafted ahead of him.

I want to tell you the story about somebody who intervened in his life. His growing up years were difficult. His dad went to prison for robbing a convenience store when his mom was pregnant with him. She worked hard- first as a housekeeper and then as a security guard. They went to church three nights a week. But at one point they were living out of the back of a U-Haul trailer. When she was at work, she left her kids with the neighbors, who seemed like nice people, but they happened to be drug dealers. That's how Donald began a life of crime when he was ten, still going to school, but hustling on the side. He would slip some of the money he made into his mom's purse to feel better about what he was doing.

One day when he was twelve, he stole a Cadillac. His feet could barely reach the pedals. As he drove off lights flashed in the rearview mirror. He sped up, headed down an alley way, and all of a sudden a car pulled out of a driveway in front of him. He t-boned it. A little lady got out, and he started to run away. But she said to him, Go sit on my porch right now! And he did. When the cops came down the alley, and saw the stolen Caddy, and this lady and a little boy sitting on her porch swing, she said, The guy who crashed into my car got away. When they eyed Donald suspiciously, she said, Oh, this my grandson!

And then she took him inside, and said, Why did you do this, young man? You could be doing so much more with your life. This is not the way God wants you to be living." And that was the day his life began to be turned around. Somebody got involved. Somebody noticed. Someday had another vision for him.

I don't know if God directed that car to pull out in front of him. But God sure directed him to the right person. Do we speak the language of involvement? I'm still envisioning what a mentoring program might look like after school here. We have seniors in this congregation who speak the language of unconditional love; who speak the language of encouragement. How do we get involved in some more relational ways with the community? How do we get involved with some issues of justice? With the stranger among us who is the immigrant? How do we get involved in helping to reduce gun violence? These aren't easy issues. We disagree sometimes on how to accomplish them. But as followers of Jesus, we are called to

care for our neighbor. How will we do that? We need to wisdom and courage that the Holy Spirit gives us.

We speak so many languages in this room that the Holy Spirit can use. Who will the Holy Spirit lead you to this week to speak one of your languages in order to share the love of Christ? Will it be the language of hospitality, the language of welcome to a stranger, the language of mentoring, the language of forgiveness, the language of justice for somebody on the margins, the language of reconciliation?

Brandon and I always talk sports when we're together. He wants to be a sports broadcaster for a career, and I think I'm going to see him on TV one of these days. So I'll close with a story about Jrue and Lauren Holiday. Jrue is a player for the New Orleans Pelicans basketball team, and his wife is a retired player for the US Women's Soccer Team. In September of 2016, when Jrue was about to start the season, Lauren found out she had a brain tumor. She was five months pregnant at the time. And Jrue said, I can't be with the team right now. I need to be with my wife. He said later, Nothing could come before my daughter and my wife.

Both of them are Christians. Lauren Holiday was facing the biggest challenge of her life. She said, I memorized Scripture verses and some days my faith felt unshakeable, and some days I was scared to death. Everything she had learned as an athlete came into play. Everything became useful: all those lessons, that hard work, that getting through the pain. She kept saying the words of the psalmist: There may be pain in the night; but joy comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5) And it may not be the next morning, or the next week, but one of these days joy will come in the morning.

Lauren Holiday had a healthy baby girl, and two weeks later she had successful brain surgery. There may be pain in the night, but joy comes in the morning. Jrue put it this way: "There was a lot of stress that I felt, a lot of pressure there. I think how my family dynamic is built, how my faith is built, we persevered through that. Always praying. My family praying, especially for my wife. My wife going through that — being pregnant and having a brain tumor — that was the point where I had to rely on other people."

"As a man and as an athlete, you always feel you can handle things by yourself. You feel like, 'I got to the league, I did it by myself.' You thank and serve people along the way — but *I* put in the work. That was somewhat in *my* control. But my wife's situation, it really wasn't in my control. So to bounce back from that has been pretty cool, pretty special to me."

We don't know what kinds of challenges we're going to face in this life. But Jesus said to his disciples, I'm sending you an Advocate; I'm sending you the Holy Spirit, to remind you of everything I said, and to give you the power to follow me, the power to make a difference in this world. Brandon's confirmation verse is from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4:13- I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. That's a promise the Holy Spirit will help him accomplish. Amen.