

“All the Words Made Flesh”

Genesis 1:1-10; John 1:1-5 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 3, 2021
World Communion Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might join with you in creating
a world of unity and goodness, with words of praise and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Holy, holy, holy. My heart, my heart adores you!

My heart knows how to say to you: Holy are you, Lord!

As I hope you will notice as we move through the service today, we decided to focus our World Communion Sunday worship on the richness of language.

Throughout the service, you're going to hear words from other languages, dropped into prayers and reflections. You heard a whole slew of them in the anthem the choir sang, accompanied by their English translation. I know that some folks are intimidated by other languages, and I want to commend the choir and Deborah for how bravely we attempt these excursions into foreign tongues. But I also want to encourage us to shift that feeling of intimidation just a little. What if it could be humility, instead of fear? What if it could be humble appreciation for the realization that the world is so much bigger and more complex than our capacity to nail it down in the words of one language?

Part of what we want to experience today is how our spirituality can be enriched by the infusion of words or phrases from other languages, partly because

those words can describe experiences of life that our own language doesn't quite capture, but also because there's just something else that happens in our brains and hearts when our practice of faith moves into a language we're not fluent in. It's like we're disarmed a little; our assumptions and prejudices become harder to hold onto. It's also – and this is probably our primary motivation for doing this on World Communion Sunday – an easy way to remind ourselves that the Christian faith is so much bigger than our experience of it; there are Christians all around the world, living out the gospel in every language.

Heilig, heilig, heilig. Mein harz, es betet dich an.

Es weiss, was es dir sagen will: Heilig bist du, Gott!

When we began our study of the gospel of John a few weeks ago, we had to start, as Maria Von Trapp would have advised, at the beginning. The connection between the first verses of John and the creation story in Genesis that kicks off the whole Bible is unmistakable. “In the beginning...” And what happened in the beginning? God spoke and things came into being. Or as John puts it: the Word was with God, and all things came into being through that Word.

I love these passages because they are some of the verses of the Bible that can most reliably stir up a sense of wonder within me. The power of language is a beautiful thing to behold. Words have the power to create. There are, of course, all sorts of complex ways to reconcile this story of God bringing the world into being by

speaking it into existence with the wondrous realities of evolution that science has revealed to us. But that is not our primary concern today.

What I want us to think about is how the power to create reality with words isn't something that's exclusive to God. It is, in fact, one of the ways in which we are made in God's image. We know that the words we say to each other shape our experience of the world. The words we say to ourselves shape our experience of the world. But even beyond that, our words have the power to create.

I had the privilege of conducting a wedding last weekend for some friends of a friend of the church. I was struck, as I prepared the ceremony, by what we're doing with words when we engage in such rituals. In the homily, I told the couple that by exchanging those vows, they were bringing a third presence into their relationship: the covenant of marriage itself. By saying those words – “I take you to be my wife... until death parts us” – they created a new thing. Did you know we can do that? Have you realized how we reflect the image of God when we do that? How careful have we been to make sure the realities we're creating with our words reflect God's will for our world?

Dieu saint, dieu saint, dieu saint: Mon coeur, mon coeur t'adore!

Mon coeur le sait, mon coeur te le dit: Sacré est ton nom.

I'm not sure it's possible to fully comprehend how much our understanding of reality depends on language. Can we think without words? Maybe, but I would

suggest that's really more like feeling. I suspect that those who are brought up in bilingual households experience the world in entirely different ways than the rest of us. I myself am merely a dabbler in other languages, fluent in none, despite six years of studying French. I like to wrap my mouth around words from other languages, just to see if I can say them. But they rarely shift my perspective on the world because they haven't been drilled deep enough into my brain.

So if the central tenet of our faith is that the Word was made flesh – which the gospel of John clearly argues it is – does it make a difference which Word that was? Must we assume that it was a word from a particular language, or is it more likely that this capital-W Word represents this incredible way that language is entwined with our identity and our experience of life? We've already established that it's a reference to the power that words have to create. Can we even wrap our heads around the idea that it's all the words made flesh? The Incarnation happens in every tongue, every distinct human experience made real through language. If not, the Body of Christ would just be body parts, not a whole being and certainly not a divine vessel. That intimidation we feel when confronted with words we don't understand and don't know how to pronounce is actually akin to what the Hebrew scriptures call the “fear of God,” for it is the beginning of the vital awareness that the vastness of God's presence in our world goes far beyond our comprehension. It's okay – it's good and holy even – to feel unsure of ourselves and a little bewildered in the presence of God. If we stick solely to our own language, we too easily become over-confident about our

capacity to not just understand God, but to explain God. How ridiculous! What a gift it is to be reminded that there are so many other layers of God's existence in our world that we don't even know how to pronounce.

Santo, santo, santo. ¡Mi Corazon te-adora!

Mi Corazon te sabe decir: ¡Santo-eres, Señor!

I love this little song. I love singing it in different languages like this. The words themselves speak to me about the power of engaging with languages other than our own, in order to enrich our spirituality. It speaks of holiness, and it speaks of the knowledge of the heart. "My heart knows how to say to you: Holy are you, Lord!" My heart knows. There is wisdom of the heart that is beyond language. Language makes us aware of it; language makes it "real" in one sense. And yet, sometimes the easiest way to get past all the baggage that our own language brings along with it is to speak that heart-wisdom in a language we're less familiar with. "Heilig bist du, Gott. Sacré est ton nom. Santo eres, Señor. Holy are you, Lord!"

On this World Communion Sunday, we focus on our unity with Christians all around the earth, who meet at this Table of Grace where Jesus, the Word made flesh, feeds us the Bread of Life. To approach this table singing songs in many languages is to celebrate how rich that unity is, to embrace the way it broadens our spirituality and helps us recognize the vastness of God's presence in our world. To lift up words that we don't fully understand, trusting that our brothers and sisters and siblings in the

faith have made these words holy before God for centuries before us, helps us find an appropriate place of humility for our worship. The Word that was made flesh is all the words – the ones that are most familiar to us and the ones we don't even know how to pronounce. The Word itself – made flesh as the languages that help us as humans bring new realities into existence – connects us to our Creating God. Even as our different languages seem to divide us and build barriers between us, with faith and trust, they can become bridges in a shared journey toward the God who made us all.

Hallelujah and Amen!