

A wealthy young Croat, a poor middle-aged Slovenian, and a middle-class, ever-youthful American walk into a German coffee shop with their kids...

No, no punchline ~ that's really how it started.

It was late autumn: cold, dark, rainy. All three of us were a bit tense, wondering how this would work. We had arranged to meet at the coffee shop one morning because the Slovenian woman (I never did get her name) asked for my help.

I knew these ladies from the Kindergarten in Munich, Germany where my son attended. Their children were in his class. Both of these mamas often looked deeply tired and frazzled (well, truth be told, nearly all mamas are tired and frazzled at that time of day!), and despite my broken German, I spoke to them each morning at drop off, hoping to convey a bit of 'you've got this' energy.

Today we celebrate the day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit in fire, wind, and word. According to Luke, the Spirit descended upon 120 believers in Jerusalem on the 50th day after Jesus' resurrection, representing over 15 different ethno-linguistic groups throughout the region.

I've heard it argued that Pentecost served as the reversal of Babel, the Old Testament story that tells of God dividing and scattering human communities by multiplying their languages. But when you read the text, that's not really what happened: the Pentecost moment didn't restore humanity to a common language, rather God demonstrated the worth and dignity of all peoples and languages. God "wove diversity and inclusivity into the very fabric of the Church. [God called God's people] to be at once the One and the Many."¹

A foreign national, a refugee and an ex-pat walk into a café...

All three of us were living in a foreign land. We had that in common. I was in Munich with my family for my husband's job, and Iva (my friend from Croatia) and her British husband decided to split the distance between their families and chose to start their own family in there in Bavaria.

¹ Debi Thomas, 2019

Fun fact: Croatian and Slovenian are close enough linguistically that one can mostly understand the other. Apparently the roots of words are roughly the same.

Iva is a bit of linguist thanks to having lived in a handful of different countries during her young adulthood, and is very adept in Hungarian, can speak a smattering of Italian and Spanish, and is fluent in German, Croatian and English. The other mom and I were both grateful when she offered to try to translate for us.

I came to learn that the Slovenian woman's Turkish husband had recently died. They had lived together in Turkey for over 15 years. As she was a Christian, spoke virtually no Turkish, and her older son had significant physical disabilities and needed specialized health care, she and her children sought refuge in Germany and had been recently settled in Munich. In Germany, her non-verbal, quadriplegic son could once again access decent medical care.

An atheist, a Russian Orthodox layperson and an Episcopal priest walk into a café...

As the people of God, we Christians believe in the power of words, of language. Along with our Jewish and Muslim siblings, we are a people of the Book. We draw meaning and purpose from the texts that have shaped our heritage: in Genesis 1, God spoke the cosmos into being by speaking unto God's Self: "And God said let there be light, and there was light..." John begins his Gospel with "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That Word is our incarnate, *enfleshed* Lord. Each Sunday, we stand to affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, we pray and baptize and celebrate and grieve and commune through the sung and spoken words of our liturgy. We are a people of the Word, and words have power.

As we are made in the image and likeness of God who speaks aloud to God's self, when we speak aloud, we speak not only to ourselves, but to one another ... and to God. And so **our words matter**. Language is important.

As Iva communicated with our friend and translated her words for me and mine for her, I was blessed to both witness and experience firsthand that the many barriers and distances separating "us" from "them" are not un-crossable. 'Inherent in the intricacies and nuances of language, [words] carry the full weight of culture, history, psychology and spirituality. To speak across barriers of race, ethnicity,

gender, religion, culture, or politics is to challenge stereotype and risk [one's own self-understanding]. It is a **brave** and **disorienting** act.²

Three women from countries with complicated and often fraught geo-political histories gather in a foreign land...

I was fascinated listening to these two ladies, especially since they had grown up in countries whose diplomatic and border relations have been intermittently strained since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. To my ear they sounded like they were speaking the same language, but it was obvious they were adapting their sentence structure, simplifying their word choice when necessary, clarifying with body language, working together to reach a common understanding and meaningful interaction, despite ingrained cultural, political, and religious bias against one another.

Perhaps more beautiful were our kids who jabbered at a table nearby in their native languages ~ with a smattering of German toddler-ese thrown in for extra flavor. As true of most kids at that age, and despite not having many words in common, our children happily communicated in a language all their own.

Likewise, my Slovenian friend and I had formed a more significant language of our own in the months before we finally met up at that café. Our smiles, eye contact, gestures of greeting, our words spoken kindly and gently to one another (despite being incoherent to the other) ... we'd been communicating in the most important ways for months.

It took us moms well over an hour to understand the need and make a plan. Because her son needed 24 hour bedside care, the Slovenian mom needed my help to get her daughter to and from a class at the primary school that my son would also be attending each week the next spring. She had no family or friends to help her at home, and she could not commit to being available for her daughter's transportation every week for several months. It was a simple request ~ and that I was happy to fulfill it meant the world to this dear woman.

We each walked out of that café feeling like we had accomplished something monumental. And we had. Language barriers were creatively, if not quickly, overcome. Political differences had been set aside for the greater good. Iva,

² Adapted from Debi Thomas

despite labeling herself as a ‘hard core atheist,’ even translated my prayer for the woman and her two children.

The roots of languages may be similar, but roots of love are exactly the same in every culture, every religion, every political orientation ~ how that love is expressed is what varies. The root remains the same.

It may have been a cold and rainy day, but in that fiery, Spirit-led Pentecost moment, my friends and I reached across walls that could have easily kept us apart ~ culture, religion, politics, ethnicity, and language. Iva is back in Croatia with her family, my Slovenian friend is likely still in Germany. I obviously am here. But the three of us were changed that day. Empowered by a Spirit of Grace and Love, we worked together for a common purpose.

The Good News of Pentecost is this: diversity without division, unity without uniformity. This kind of diversity and unity seems to be the vision God has for our community of faith, and the hope we have as we build God’s Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

Reaching across the divide is the work toward which we are called. Breaking down barriers. Seeing beyond the surface. Loving without holding back.

That is the vision. Yet we live in a polarized world of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ red and blue, black and white, pro-this and anti-that. This has accomplished little more than fostering a culture of violence in all our ‘them-ing and condemning.’

God calls us “to be united in love, not uniform in identity.”³ Let’s be charitable to those who differ from us, honoring the rich variety of peoples and tongues and identities and expressions that God has created. Let’s listen to each other with open hearts. Let’s be gracious in our assumptions. And let’s remember that we are made in the image and likeness of a God of love, and work together for the common good.

Three unlikely friends and their kids met for coffee, and together they did important work.

³ The Rev. Stephanie Spellers at Prov IV Synod, April 2022