

“Spirit of Truth”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 31, 2009

Pentecost / Confirmation Sunday
Rev. John Wahl

Ezekiel 37:1-10
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Yesterday, I attended the wedding of two Korean-Americans who have in common this distinctive culture but who also come from very different backgrounds. The groom is a second-generation Korean-American: he was born in the United States and grew up speaking English and was immersed in American culture. He attended mixed American schools and has at least as many Caucasian friends as those of Korean descent. The bride grew up in Korea, moving to the United States only three years ago, and her language and culture remain very distinctly Korean.

The wedding was held at a Korean-American church and throughout the service and reception, most of what was spoken was translated first in English then in Korean, or first in Korean then in English. Of course, not everyone who spoke was equally fluent in both languages. At some points, the humor and the clarity of what was being spoken became lost in the translation. So, many of the witnesses there yesterday, myself included, felt lost at times, longing to understand what was being said, relying on those who were better able to translate from one language into the other in order to comprehend.

In addition to the language barriers, there were cultural aspects that also required translation. The bride and groom were married in traditional western wedding garments: a white gown and a black tuxedo. But, at the reception, they both changed into more traditional Korean garments. For the groom, the second-generation Korean-American, this was the first time he had ever worn such an outfit and as they moved from table to table, greeting the guests and bowing reverently to their elders, I could see him tugging and pulling at his clothing, unfamiliar with how they were supposed to feel on him and conscious that everyone in the room was watching him in this unconventional outfit.

The food, of course, was all Korean, at least it seemed that way to me, and that was great. But, several of the first-generation Koreans present told me how even that had been accommodated to fit its American context: leaving out some of the stronger spices and having a traditional American wedding cake with icing, of all things!

I couldn't help but be reminded – as I was so many times during the two-and-a-half years that I served in that church – how analogous this mingling of two cultures is to the ways that all churches accommodate between two different cultures: Christian and secular. In church, we are constantly faced with challenges in how to translate what is taking place amongst ourselves. Some of us are very accustomed to Christian language and traditions, while others are much more at home with traditional American culture – or at least some variant of that culture. When we worship, when we meet to conduct church business, when we share times of fellowship, there is an almost constant need to translate back and forth between two: Christian and secular. And to those who are very immersed in one culture or the other, this can seem to be a cumbersome process; surely something will be lost in the translation.

And yet, this is an essential task. For each ensuing generation, the process of translation must take place. For a long time, probably into some point in my childhood, the cultures of the church and American society had a strong overlap. Many of the families in my neighborhood went to church – even if not the same church – and there was an expectation that times would be set aside in our society on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings for church activities. A week in the summer could be set aside to attend Vacation Bible School or a youth Mission trip and it would not penalize your chances of making the football team or participate in a summer softball league.

But you know, as I know, that the overlap between church and society is not as broad as it was even a generation ago. The language of the Christian faith has been disappearing from our society, in many ways lost in the translation. Many young people and their families are forced to make choices that, when I was a child, did not have to be made. And it extends beyond the choice of youth group or soccer practice. There is now a perception in our society that participating in a Christian faith community might be a nice thing to do, but the meaning of a commitment to Christ is almost incomprehensible. Proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, as our confirmands will do alongside the rest of you today, is not just a choice between activities, but about commitments.

Some of you may be wondering why Pentecost Sunday was the time chosen for this church to welcome our newly confirmed members into the ministry of the church; or why we designate this day to bring them forward and publicly profess their faith and proclaim an allegiance to Christ in word and deed. You may be wondering what a few months worth of group lessons at this particular age might

teach them about their faith; how what they have learned might help them come to make their faith commitment on this day. You may wonder what young people take away from a confirmation class that goes beyond learning “who is the father of Presbyterianism?” and “name the three sections of the Book of Order?”

Confirming young people as members of the church on Pentecost Sunday makes sense because this is a day that we officially do – or at least should – grant them a full voice to speak in the church. From this day forward, they are considered adult members and enjoy all of the privileges of membership: which include the right to speak during congregational meetings, to vote in congregational elections, and to serve in leadership positions on session, as deacons, and on nominating committees.

Having confirmation on Pentecost reaffirms our desire to be a church that is truly inclusive of different ages and, likewise, of different cultures, languages, occupations, backgrounds and interests. The celebration of confirmation on Pentecost shows that we are committed to discover unity in the midst of our diversity and to share a common language of faith despite our varied vocabularies.¹ It shows that we are committed to stay in the business of translation – no matter how difficult or awkward it might feel.

We choose Pentecost as the day to celebrate confirmation not just to honor the coming of the Holy Spirit, but because the Spirit has come to fill us, even to overflowing. Of all the other roles that the Spirit serves – helper, comforter, counselor – one of its most important functions is translator. On that Sunday morning in Jerusalem, fifty days after the resurrection, the disciples proclaimed the good news in language that listeners from these many foreign lands could finally recognize. With the Spirit, their words could get through to people from around the world; the power of the gospel made ready for them.

Today’s Old Testament lesson is one of my favorite in scripture because it makes clear what the power of the Spirit can be. In the midst of a valley of dry bones – likely the site of some ancient battlefield – God can bring new life out of that which has literally been torn apart. Even after the birds of the air have come to lick these bones clean, God can rearrange them, allow for new flesh to grow upon them, and breathe new life into them; making them whole and living once again.

¹ Suzanne Mayer in *Lectionary Homiletics*, May 2005.

That is the power of the Spirit; what, in John's gospel, Jesus calls the Spirit of Truth. The Spirit of Truth is the presence of God in the world which took Christ's place after he ascended into heaven. No matter how isolated or alone someone might feel, the Spirit of Truth is with them. No matter how mixed up or broken someone might feel, the Spirit of Truth can heal them and bring them to wholeness. This Spirit is the gift that Jesus gave to us; so that, together, as a Christian community, we might proclaim him alone as Lord and Savior and claim the power of God that brings presence, forgiveness, healing, and joy to all who put their trust in Him.

And yet: "The Spirit of Truth is not a private possession, nor is its presence discernible as an experience of the individual believer. The Spirit of Truth is given to and known in the community...It keeps the community grounded in Jesus' revelation of God, not in an individual's private experience of God."²

And so, it makes sense that on Pentecost Sunday, we invite young people to come forward and affirm their faith in Jesus Christ, and – at the same time – to become full members of Christ's church. For them, the challenge of translating what a faith in Jesus Christ and membership in the church means is not complete. They will still need our help, as we will need theirs. For all of us, some of it still gets lost in the translation; but together we can teach one another, and show one another that God – through Christ and the Spirit – is with us, and that in the power of God, all things are truly possible. AMEN.

² *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary* vol. 9