

Even the Cretans?

(Acts 2:1-21)

The story is told about the Yates Pool – a well known oil field in West Texas. During the depression this oil field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates wasn't able to make enough money off his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in constant danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family – like many others during the depression – had to live on a government subsidy.

Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was no doubt greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then one day a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as productive. In fact, 30 years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential to produce 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

And Mr. Yates owned it all – a real life Jed Clampett story. The day he purchased the land he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet, he'd been living on relief. He was a multimillionaire living in poverty because he didn't know the oil was there even though he owned it.¹

Many Christians live in a similar situation. Many of us are unaware of the energizing power of the Holy Spirit that God has woven into the fabric of our lives while we were yet in our mothers' womb. And so we live in a kind of spiritual poverty, even though the Holy Spirit lives within each of us. We are unaware of the gifts of the indwelling Spirit and cannot hear God speaking to us in many different ways. Please pray with me.

Spirit of the Living God, be upon us this morning. Open our hearts and minds, our eyes and ears; so that we might know the Spirit that dwells within us. Unlock the scriptures so that we might be renewed and infused with the joy of being available to the energizing and enabling power of your Spirit. Through Christ Jesus and your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Did you have a little trouble understanding the New Testament reading this morning? I hope you were able to follow the story on the video board if you don't speak Spanish or German. The second chapter of Acts is about the day the early Christian church was formed. It's the story of the Holy Spirit – the Advocate – descending on the people of Jerusalem. It's the story of Pentecost.

Listen to Luke's introduction to Acts 2. I'm reading from *The Message*.

◇ ¹ Bill Bright, "How to Be Filled with the Spirit" (Campus Crusade publication)

¹⁻⁴ When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

Jerusalem was the religious center of the Hebrew culture – the site of Solomon’s great temple. It was also on the trade route from North Africa to Syria and beyond to Eastern Europe. So the city attracted many visitors from different cultures. And these cultures, of course, didn’t all speak the same language. The day of Pentecost was no exception. Listen to more of Acts 2 and hear what Luke has to say about the great diversity of Jerusalem at the time.

⁵⁻¹¹ There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came running. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn’t for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; immigrants

from Rome, both Jews and proselytes. Even Cretans and Arabs! "They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

Why would Luke place special emphasis on the Cretans? He was obviously in awe of the fact that “even the Cretans” could understand God’s word being spoken. Well, the Cretans were related to the Greeks. But their language was not Greek. In fact, even today linguists and anthropologists are uncertain about just what language the Cretans from the first millennia B.C. spoke. But it was definitely not Greek. The Cretan language was not even a Hellenic language.

The early Cretans were a relatively advanced society. They were best known for their fine bows used for hunting and warfare. But because of the early language barrier the Greeks and other first century Mediterranean cultures labeled the Cretans as barbarians. The term barbarian originated from the Greek word “barbar” which means “speaking nonsense.”

The Greeks distinguished themselves from other peoples by the languages they spoke. This helps us to understand why they would label their own ancestors as barbarians. To understand this emphasis on “even the Cretans” we need to remember that Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, was a Greek.

As a Greek witnessing this spectacle of people speaking and hearing in different languages, we see why Luke would be so amazed that Galileans could be speaking the Cretans language. Listen to the rest of Luke’s account of Pentecost.

¹²Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?" ¹³Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine." ¹⁴⁻²¹That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning.

How did you feel when you heard the reading in different languages this morning? Were you frustrated that you couldn't understand the whole text? Did you tune out those parts of the reading that you didn't understand? Did you simply ignore the spoken word and rely on the projected word? Or perhaps you listened to the rhythms of the different languages, to pick up an occasional word you might recognize.

There are two important ideas that we need to take away from Acts 2 on this day of Pentecost. The first is that we are all empowered by the Holy Spirit. God speaks to us in many different ways – even in different languages. Remember Mr. Yates, that sheep farmer. In the midst of his poverty he was unaware of the wealth beneath his feet as he struggled to feed and cloth his family. Sometimes, we too are living in the midst of spiritual poverty, unaware of the spiritual being that lives within us.

We don't always hear God speaking, awaking us to the indwelling spirit. We don't always hear God's voice because we don't speak the

language. Like the Greeks of Luke's day, we distinguish ourselves from others by the languages they speak. Like the Greeks of Luke's day, we label them as strange or different simply because we can't comprehend what they are saying – what God might be saying to us.

The second idea we need to take away from this text is that there is great diversity in our church. We come from different backgrounds. We speak different languages. We eat different foods. But in the end we are all the same. In the end we are all joined by a single common bond.

We are all children of God. It makes little difference that we don't all speak the same language. This text has great meaning for our lives today, particularly in light of the controversy our nation is debating over immigration and the language of the land.

The last verse of Acts 2 says it all. "Whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved." It doesn't make any difference where we come from or what language we speak. There is a common language spoken by all God's children. It's called the language of love.

Acts 2 proclaims the diversity of God's creation and of Christ's holy church. Act 2 calls each of us to put aside our prejudices and accept all of God's creation. Acts 2 calls us to stop labeling people simply because they don't speak our language. Acts 2 calls us to accept everyone no matter who they are, where they come from, or what language they speak. Yes! Even the Cretans!