

What Language Shall I Borrow?

Romans 8:26, Genesis 11:1

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When Becca and I lived in New Jersey, we were good friends with a Korean mission pastor and his wife. Once they went away on vacation and asked Becca to keep their little French poodle at our parsonage for a week. The one problem was that the dog spoke only Korean. Becca learned a few basic commands in Korean, because the dog would not respond to English. Our son Nathan must have been three or four years old, and one day Becca looked out in the back yard and saw Nathan pointing his finger and instructing the poodle, saying “Frere Jacques! Frere Jacques!”

What language do we use to speak to God? The Good Friday hymn *O Sacred Head* asks memorably, “What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend?” We all have a sense that our words fail us when it comes to thanking God or describing God or praising God. No doubt that is why we turn to music, and when we do use words we turn to poetry. We can’t talk about God with the straightforward language of a technical manual or the evening news.

In Romans 8 (26) Paul speaks about the inadequacy of our language: “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” We all know what it is like to be at a loss for words, to know that what we want to say is too deep for words. We all know times like that: times of loss, times of excruciating beauty, times of awareness of God’s holiness and otherness, and times when we have become aware of God’s love for us.

A story I published many years ago had the title “The Language of Heaven.” It was about my brother and I taking a spring break trip to the Smoky Mountains, but it was about how the Smokies reminded us of the mountains of Japan, where we spent our childhood. Since we had come back to the States, Japan had taken on the aura of our true homeland, that other country shrouded in mist and memory. In our home, Japan took the place of Plato’s ideal realm, a kind of heaven where they spoke another language. In the story, set in the early 70’s, we came across a restaurant in Maggie Valley called “Geisha Gardens.” The sign said “A little taste of Japan in the Smokies.” I’ve really been there. A man recreated a country he had never even visited from photographs and cookbooks. Shrouded in fog, it was like entering another dimension. Suddenly a peacock appeared under the *torii*. (That really happened.) My brother got down on his knees and began to approach the peacock carefully. He said the first Japanese words that came to his mind, words he had heard over and over in Japanese church: *Ten ni mashimasu, warera no chichi o*, “Our Father who art in heaven.” And the peacock spread his tail, “a dozen dozen suns in orbit, singing.”

Is there a special holy language that we should use? Our sense that perhaps this is so is seen in the attraction of saying the Mass in Latin, or preserving the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in Greek. Growing up Southern Baptist, I sometimes got the impression that the language of heaven was King James English. Not long ago, pastors only prayed in Thees and Thous. I’m glad we got away from that, but on the other hand I’m not sure that prayers with the flat prose of emails and grocery lists are appropriate either. We ought at least to pray with a sense that we are straining to use language to say things that our language cannot say.

Back in the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa said that this is why we say that God is “above every name.” God and Christ are not defined by the names we give them. God is always

beyond our description, and by naming him we have not limited him. God is still infinite, while we are finite.

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas said that there are three kinds of God-talk:

1. *Univocal*—meaning that we use exactly the same word to describe God that we use to describe human beings, and the word means the same thing.
2. *Equivocal*—meaning that the words we use about God are used in an entirely different way that when we use them about human beings, so God-talk is almost meaningless it's so ambiguous.
3. *Analogical*—meaning that we use words by analogy to our experience, understanding that when we say that God is Father that we do not mean literally that God is a father, but that he is like a father in certain ways.

So we speak the only language we can—human language—comparing God to people and objects we know: parent, shepherd, rock, fortress, fire, light.

This is the language of worship, comparing God to what we know, using adjectives knowing that they are true about God in a very different way than they are true about people. We take images that we have been given by the tradition—and especially by the Bible. While we don't understand those images as literally true (God is not a rock) those metaphors help us to talk to God and to understand something about God.

But there can be a difference between the language of worship and the language of witness. The language we use to talk to God, the language we learn to use in church, may not work as a language to talk *about* God to others.

Here's the beginning of a poem by Susan Stewart in the current issue of *Poetry* magazine [“A Language,” July/August 2011, p. 296]:

I had heard the story before
about the two prisoners, alone
in the same cell, and one
gives the other lessons in a language.
Day after day, the pupil studies hard—
what else does he have to do?—and year
after year they practice,
waiting for the hour of release.
They tackle the nouns, the cases, and genders,
the rules for imperatives and conjugations,
but near the end of his sentence, the teacher
suddenly dies and only the pupil
goes back through the gate and into the open
world. He travels to the country of his new
language, fluent, and full of hope.
Yet when he arrives he finds
that the language he speaks is not
the language that is spoken. He has learned
a language one other person knew—its inventor,
his cell-mate and teacher.

Sometimes I think that we in church *are* those prisoners, teaching and learning a language made up for church that no one on the outside understands.

The story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1) begins by saying that once there was a common language. It's a strange story about how God saw language as the key to the development of technology, which led to overweening pride. But behind the story is this memory—or dream—of a common language, when we could actually understand one another.

In Act 2 (4-11), on the day of Pentecost, the story is reversed. The Spirit comes on the apostles and they speak, but all the foreigners hear them speaking in their own languages. It is the Spirit of God that takes human languages and causes people to understand the truth about God.

We ought to *try* to speak so people can understand us. Colossians 4:6 (NIV) says, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt”—let it be stimulating, not insipid, insightful rather than boring. But if you are serious about being a witness to Christ you will discover soon enough that your words aren't really what matter. Sometimes our words can be completely lame, and we think we are talking in circles, and all of a sudden the other person says, “Oh! I think I get it!” Many times I've had people tell me that things I've said really spoke to them when I had no idea—and the thing they heard might not even been what I meant to say.

Early in my ministry I struck up a friendship with a sportswriter at the University of Alabama who would regale me with tales of press conferences with Bear Bryant. Mike was not a believer, but we shared an interest in Chinese food. So every couple of weeks we would meet in downtown Tuscaloosa for lunch at the only Chinese restaurant. We talked politics and literature and football, with occasional questions of meaning. After a year of this, I got transferred to Birmingham and lost touch with Mike. But a few months later I had a call from Mike saying that he had finally “got it” and became a Christian and was considering going to seminary. You never know what God might do with your words when the Spirit gets hold of someone.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2 (13-14 NIV), “We speak not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” In the end, our witness does not depend on our language. It depends on God's Spirit communicating with the human spirit.

So it is with these words, spoken week after week from this pulpit, even in these strange ruminations on language. These words will never be adequate, but the Spirit is adequate. How language communicates reality will always be a mystery, and how poetry and metaphor evoke life and love more mysterious still.

Helen Keller reflected more on the mystery of language than most. Born deaf and blind, Helen could not communicate with anyone until the day she took a walk with her teacher Anne Sullivan. Helen reports it in *The Story of My Life*:

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each

name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. [ch. 4]

Something like that happens to us. God has been pumping the water of his life over us. It has been flowing, but we did not have a name for it. One day someone spells into our hand J-e-s-u-s and the mystery of God is revealed to us and sets us free.