

Last week I stopped by at this new cafe about three miles east on Hull Street. I was really excited to visit because it's called "Cafe y Sabor" and I figured it would be a great place to speak Spanish, my second language, which I don't get to speak everyday.

I walked in ready with my phrases, "Me pido un cafe...cual postre se recomiende?" but was I quickly overwhelmed upon entering.

Because there was no English in the entire restaurant. The whole menu board was in Spanish, and not just Spanish but *Latin American* Spanish, whose food vocabulary differs from the Spanish I learned studying in Spain. On top of that, I was the only gringa--white girl--there and people were in line, behind me, the servers moving fast. I was intimidated. Confused. In way over my head. Was I going to make it through my order? Would people be patient with me? Did I even know what to order?

Luckily, there was a friendly employee setting out some bread buns on racks by the door. He must have seen my deer-in-the-headlights look because he greeted me, and asked, in English, if he could help, and I explained, in Spanish, that I wanted to speak Spanish and was wondering what they had for breakfast. He handed me one of the fresh buns, whose name I had never heard of, but they tasted really good, like pop-overs. When I got the register, I ordered two.

There's a sort of disorientation that goes along with speaking your second language. You enter a world where you're not quite sure you understand, but you want to nonetheless. You work on growing your fluency, practicing with others. You enter interactions with expectations of how to act and speak in that given circumstance but then there's an initial displacement which can grow into a feeling of alienation, of being in over your head, unable to fully manage or function within the circumstance you're encountering.

Now you may think, "Well, I don't speak a second language, "but if you're a Christian today, you do! Because being a follower of Christ is like speaking a second language. Our daily lives have one way of thinking, one way to understand the world, one language of sorts. The language of the world says things like cause equals effect; you get what you deserve; People don't change; God is judgmental and far away.

But faith gives us another language, a new vocabulary and a different set of conventions to understand the world. We've been reviewing and highlighting some of these faith-terms and faith-language in our recent sermon series: The language of faith teaches us that we're "justified by grace through faith" and not through earnings. The language of faith speaks about people as both "sinner and saint"—messed-up and redeemed. The language of faith says that God is about "law and gospel" --judgment *and* mercy--and that God comes close to us through the "means of grace."

But how quickly do we find ourselves in over our heads when trying to speak and think in the language of faith. How much easier it is to revert back to the language of the world our native tongue.

Just look at the Thessalonians, to whom Paul writes in our reading today. They were one of the first communities to learn the language of faith in Christ in a place where everyone was used to speaking Pagan.

Paul knew their learning the faith would be difficult, especially because he primarily dealt with Gentiles, people who weren't native speakers of religious life. But Paul was an evangelist, a messenger of the good news, someone who worked tirelessly to teach people how to speak this

language of Christ in a world that didn't know it. Paul became the grammarian of faith, the vocabulary expert, the master translator who helped the early churches learn the second language of faith and redefine their lives using its conventions.

Paul must have been a good teacher and the Thessalonians good foreign-language students, because in this letter to them after he's left, Paul compliments the community on their fluency. He praises their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." They have learned the message well, and not just "in word only" but also in its customs and conventions: Paul says message of the gospel, the language of faith, came through to them "also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

Because of Paul's evangelism, and, we can assume, lots of practice, the Thessalonians have got their second language of faith down pat. They're so fluent, people may even believe they've known it all along: they "became imitators...of the Lord" and "an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." From them, "word of the Lord has sounded forth...not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place [their] faith in God has become known" Paul helped the people understand the Good News of Christ by translating it into a language they could understand. And then those people spoke and translated the messages to others in a world that didn't understand.

But the church doesn't always succeed at this, and sometimes the language of faith is a barrier to entry rather than a gift. Sometimes the way the church talks causes disorientation and confusion, and, in the worst moments, it may push people away. The Reformers of the sixteenth century found these barriers in their own time, when church had grown too alien from the common people.

Linguistically speaking, the church regarded Latin as the proper language of worship and scripture and church teaching. And while there were exceptions, where local priests lead Mass in the local language, for the most part, when everyone gathered, Mass was in Latin, and if you couldn't speak or read it, or didn't have the means to learn it, too bad.

So the Reformers, like Paul, helped evangelize their own people and helped them understand the language of faith. "Christ ought to be preached that faith may be established," Luther wrote, which meant Christ had to be heard and understood in the people's language. And so Luther translated the Mass and the Bible into the vernacular; and wrote hymns and church documents and catechisms in German. All to help the faithful better understand the language of faith.

In every age, the church needs people like Paul, people like the Reformers, who can act like the server who greeted me at the door and guided me to the tasty buns: people who help us learn and use and renew the language of faith when it's entirely new or when the circumstance overwhelms us, or when it becomes too confusing for its own speakers. And when we feel, after much practice, like we know enough about this language to speak it fluently, we can help others find the tasty popovers.

AMEN.

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Lutheran Church of Our Saviour  
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Sermon series observing the 500th Anniversary of the  
Protestant Reformation  
Topic: In the Vernacular  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Excerpt from Martin Luther's  
*On the Freedom of a Christian* Matthew 22:15-22