

Despite what anyone might think of his views regarding politics or society in general, it is hard to deny stand up comedian and host of Comedy Central's *Daily Show* Trevor Noah is a marvelous storyteller. One place this skill really shines through is in his memoir titled *Born A Crime, Stories From A South African Childhood*. As the title implies, Trevor Noah was born and raised in South Africa. When he was born in 1984, South Africa was still under the unjust rule of apartheid. Trevor's parents met, as most of our parents did, and fell in love. But for his parents, their love was a crime, because his mother is black, and his father is white. It was against the law of apartheid in South Africa for people from two different races to be together, to live into the love they felt for each other. But Trevor's parents are remarkable people. His mother especially so. Despite the law, both his parents yearned to embody the love they felt for each other, and that is how Trevor was born.

For a while his parents tried to make it work as a family, but their child was in constant danger, and so were they. Under apartheid, if Trevor's existence had been discovered and reported to the authorities, he would have been taken away from his mother and put in some form of foster care with people whose skin color was closer to his. Because of this, just going to the park as a family had to be a carefully orchestrated event. Trevor's mother hired a woman who was lighter complexion to walk down the street with her two-year-old son, while she walked several paces behind, and Trevor's father walked on the other side of the street. Trevor was told never to call his father "Daddy" to protect them both.

After apartheid was lifted, Trevor did not have to worry about being separated from his mother, but that didn't mean he was accepted by society. He was considered an outsider by everyone; he didn't belong to any race or tribe. One of the characteristics that makes Trevor Noah a remarkable person is that instead of allowing his outsider status to make him angry, bitter, and isolate himself from the world, he did something much more beautiful and brave: he made himself a living bridge between differences.

South Africa is a country with 11 official languages. One of the ways to keep people oppressed, Trevor writes in his book, is to keep them separated by any means necessary. For South Africa, that separation was in the form of tribes. There are a lot of them, and each tribe has its own culture and language. For example, Trevor's mother is from the Xhosta tribe. This is the same tribe Nelson Mandela was from. The Xhosta were known for being thoughtful, intelligent, well-read and good at working with others. Trevor's stepfather was from the Zulu tribe. The Zulu were warriors, patriarchal, violent. Both tribes have their own language and their own sense of pride.

Knowing her son would grow up in a divided country, Trevor's mother insisted he learn as many languages as possible starting with English. English was the language of authority and business. It was the language of success. At home, Trevor spoke Xhosa, unless he was talking with his stepfather then he spoke Zulu. He learned German because that is father's language. I do not know how many languages he is able to speak, but his ability to speak the languages of the people around him helped Trevor cross cultural boundaries, form friendships and dissolve potentially deadly or dangerous situations.

Just one example of the many from his book, is when he tells about a time when he was a teenager walking home and a group of young men from another tribe started following him. As they walked behind him, they talked about how they planned to rob him and beat him up. Because he spoke their language, he understood what they were saying. He was scared, but turned around and spoke to them in their language saying that he'd like join them. They responded by laughing, apologizing because they hadn't realized he was part of their tribe, wished him a good day and walked away.

Being able to speak to people in their language has helped Trevor do more than avoid trouble. It has helped him see people in a unique light. "When you make an effort to speak someone else's language," he writes, "even if it is just basic phrases here and here, you are saying to them, 'I understand that you have a culture and identity that exists beyond me. I see you as a human being.'" His words resound with the same meaning as a quote from Nelson Mandela, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, it goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, it goes to the heart."

Language is one of the main elements in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard this morning. It's the reading we hear every year on Pentecost Sunday because it describes what we are remembering today: the day the Holy Spirit, called the Advocate in our Gospel reading, came down into the heart of the church in such a powerful way it was described as being like violent wind and flames. This powerful Holy Spirit gave the church – that is the people who were gathered in that upper room – the remarkable ability to speak the languages of the people who were outside their comfortable upper room – that is, out in the city outside their doors. The Holy Spirit then seems to be what sends them all outside to use what they had been given to tell everyone the good news about Jesus: his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension.

It's perhaps tempting to put the emphasis of this story on the speaking of the languages. But that isn't what was emphasized in the reading from Acts: it was the hearing of the languages. When people heard the languages of their native lands, that is what caused amazement. That is what got their attention. That is what made them feel drawn to the message. Because that was the part, like Trevor Noah learned and Nelson Mandela wisely observed, that made them feel acknowledged and respected as human

beings. They weren't numbers Peter was hoping to baptize that day so he could set a record for the biggest number of people baptized in one day by one person. They weren't dollar signs the apostles were hoping to collect for a fundraising project. They were people, human beings loved by God, people needing to hear the message that God sees them, and God loves them. In fact, God loves them so much, God is willing to do whatever it takes to bridge the divides that separate us from God and each other.

Over the many centuries that have passed, the work of the Church has not changed. It is still to go out into the world to do the work the Holy Spirit gives us and as our advocate equips us to do. And that work is primarily to tell the good news of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. What I wonder is if the church sometimes forgets that we are to do this work in a way that respects people in the same way as hearing a person's native languages did on that day so long ago.

I've seen this respect and love right here when some of us at Church of the Good Shepherd who can speak languages like Spanish do so with students and professors who come for Wednesday Lunch. I see how much the students from Spanish speaking countries look forward to those interactions and how much it means to them. No one is showing off. Instead, it's about feeling respected; welcomed for who they are, and is what love looks like.

There are other kinds of languages besides spoken ones. The language of an open door says we not only welcome people, we trust them. We are more concerned with the person than we are with our building, and are saying the reason our building is here is to be shared with our neighbors. I've seen passersby pick up trash on our lawn or driveway, perhaps as an expression of gratitude for the ways we share our place with them.

These are a few ways the differences between us as a church and the people in the community are bridged. And there are so many more opportunities for us to build and create such bridges that we need to open to receive and hear. Sometimes we as a church can forget that we also have a language that many people outside our doors do not understand. We have colors and symbols and words that have meaning to us that can leave others with blank expressions. And sometimes, in our fervor to be present to our neighbors, we can unintentionally speak in ways they can't understand.

On Friday I met a mother who was at OU for Bobcat Student Orientation who expressed to me her distress over a survey given to incoming students that revealed 90% of the students in that group have never engaged in prayer or meditation or something similar. She was shocked that the term and practice of prayer had no meaning to so many. Sadly, I wasn't, as I have seen surveys done on much larger scales that report the area of largest growth when it comes to religion in America is the growth of people who have no religious or spiritual affiliation. I've had many conversations this year with

students who express the belief that the church – any church – is a harmful and negative influence on society. These are hard things to hear, they are not warm nor welcoming. But they are real. And while these things are hard to hear, they don't have to be discouraging.

It isn't the first time the church has encountered a world that did not receive or understand the Love of God as we know it through Jesus. And it doesn't mean anyone of us has failed. It just means there is plenty of opportunity to listen to the Holy Spirit, to let the Holy Spirit empower us so we can hear where the people in the world are coming from and find ways to speak so we can be heard in ways that cause wonder instead of cynicism or disgust.

The presence of the TARDIS outside our church has been one way to speak to some people where they feel recognized and welcomed. CrossRoads Café, our coffee shop ministry, is another way we can engage the world through the language of coffee and through things like our pay it forward program show God's Love in Christ. Displaying the rainbow flag on our church sign is using a symbol to express our welcome and inclusion of the LGBTQ community. Perhaps we can imagine even more ways to speak so that people can hear that they are seen and respected and loved by God.

One of the reasons I find Trevor Noah's story so compelling is because it is a message of hope that divisions can be bridged. We hear about divisions so often, sometimes it's good to hear about those who have found a way to bridge those divisions. Because that is part of our work as a church, and it can be reassuring to remember that when such work seems daunting, or those divisions seem impassable, we do have an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who is with us, and will equip us to speak so that people can hear of God's love for all people in wondrous ways.