

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis
Pentecost Sermon on Acts 2:1-21
First UCC Northfield
5.28.23

Scripture

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews^[a] and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.*

*¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.*

*²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*¹

¹ NRSVUE, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%202%3A1-21&version=NRSVUE>

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Sermon

If you were on the Internet in 2018, you might've heard the story about a bewildering audio recording. You see, in May 2018 a high school student in Georgia was studying for a literature exam where the word "laurel" was one of her vocab words. She looked it up on vocabulary.com to play the audio of the word but instead of hearing the word laurel, she heard the word "yanny."

When she asked her friends to listen to the audio recording of the word, they all heard different things. Some heard laurel and some heard yanny. The story went viral because it seemed unexplainable and because others kept having this experience. It was similar to a story three years earlier that also went viral. You may remember it was about a two-tone colored dress. Some saw it as white and gold, and some saw it as blue and black. Seemingly unexplainable, they were actually good scientific reasons why some people saw one thing and other saw something different.

It turns out with the yanny/laurel auditory recording, scientists have a good explanation too. Though the word was spoken clearly by someone with wonderful dictation, the actual sound of it is what scientists call an ambiguous figure, or basically, the auditory version of an optical illusion. You might recall the famous optical illusion that either portrays two vases or two profiles of human faces, depending on which image your eyes focus upon. The yanny/laurel sound clip is like an optical illusion for your ears. And like an optical illusion, or the viral dress color debacle, there's not really a correct answer either way.

What's happening is that people whose brains focus on higher frequency sounds hear yanny, where people's brains who focus on lower frequency sounds hear the word, laurel. What one hears simply depends on what frequency your brain has learned to pay attention to. Younger people often are more attuned to higher sounds and older people are often more attuned to lower, sounds, partly because of how their ears age over time. And yes, what you hear might also of course, have to do with your context: the speakers that you're listening from or headphones or acoustics in the room where you're listening.

Whether it is the ear-brain connection, or the eye-brain connection, where we see different colors, or hear different sounds, I think we probably all have some sort of experience of perceiving things differently than those around us. Perception is such an interesting thing, isn't it? What we take in causes us to write our own stories in our head about what is happening, as we make meaning out of the things we perceive around us.

It's interesting to think about, as we see incredible polarization, and dehumanization happening in our nation and around the world at the moment. Perception matters. Language matters. These are the times we are most tempted to retreat to our like-minded groups, and social media sites where algorithms show us more of what we want to see, creating echo chambers rather than diverse perspectives. This time, right now, is easy to fall into "us versus them" thinking. Which is why Pentecost is so important.

When we talk about Pentecost in the Christian church, we talk about it as the

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coming of the Holy Spirit among the people. But Pentecost is “from the Greek *pentekostos*, meaning ‘fiftieth’” and long before the story of Pentecost as we know it, it was a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest.² What happens in our story today adds to the meaning of this festival day.

The Spirit—whoosh!—comes as wind, and fires up people so much that the Jews who are from Galilee start speaking in different languages. They may have each spoken 2 or 3 languages naturally, but the scripture tells us that many Jewish folks gathered for Pentecost from various places: “Parthians Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphlia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, how is it that we’re hearing, each of us, in our own language?

Indeed. What’s that about? Why, in this wild, swirling, Spirit-filled moment, did God’s Spirit choose to invigorate and inspire people, using different *languages*? Think about what happened here among the people. Imagine the people who felt these languages fizzing up on their tongues who started *speaking*. They probably felt very out of their natural element as they started communicating in foreign languages.

The people who could *hear* in the particularity of their own language had to stretch themselves, too. We say language matters because languages represent cultural understandings, concepts, and ways of thinking. For Galilean Jewish people to start speaking the language of Parthian or Egyptian Jewish people was to expand notions of understanding. It is to say that God is much bigger than any one people or place. It is expansive.

Preacher Debie Thomas writes, that the pivotal point of Pentecost is that they all “had to suspend disbelief, drop their cherished defenses, and opt for curiosity and wonder instead of fear and contempt...in the face of impossible difference, God compelled God’s people to engage. From day one [of what is often called the birth of the church], the call was to press in, linger, listen, and speak...” with those who are different from you.” Debie Thomas says, “here’s the thing: no matter how passionately I disagree with your opinions and beliefs, I cannot disagree with your experience. Once I have learned to hear [your words] and speak your story in the words that matter most to you, then I have stakes I never had before. I can no longer thrive at your expense. I can no longer make you my other.”³

For some, that works, and the speakers and hearers are changed. For others, as we saw in Mike’s retelling of the scripture, well, they assume that what they’ve perceived simply means that people had been drinking. Some get it, some don’t, and that’s okay. Why?

Luke-Acts scholar Matt Skinner will tell you that the Spirit doesn’t just use this

² Debie Thomas, “When You Send Forth Your Spirit,” sermon/commentary on Acts 2:1-21, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3017-when-you-send-forth-your-spirit>

³ Ibid.

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one moment at Pentecost for people to get it right. This Pentecost moment is meant to be seen by the writer of Luke and Acts as the first of *many* Spirit-filled moments through the book of Acts. Again and again in the book of Acts, Skinner says, people go far beyond their comfort zones to engage in ways that reach out to people of all different backgrounds, cultures, languages, diets practices. Again and again, the Spirit fills them to share love, and care, and compassion in extravagant ways to meet people where they are, not where they expect people to be. Nor where its comfortable for people. “If you see Pentecost as God’s spirit active in the world,” Skinner says, “then Acts is about Pentecost, after Pentecost, after Pentecost, beginning again, and again” and continuing today. “We are not riding a wave, this is something that continues to happen, and it is continually happening...times, when God breaks in and sets the church on a new course of travel, or a new discovery of what God is making possible.” It involves a fair amount of wonder, plenty of confusion, and new opportunities. The Pentecost story today is “the first of many Pentecost Spirit moments we are living into.”⁴

The miracle of Pentecost isn’t in the details of what happened but in the expansiveness that God’s Spirit helps people live into. The Holy Spirit helps us meet one another in our particularities because each person is a unique and valued child of God: The Parthians, the Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphlia, Egypt,” the Northfielders, and the the First UCCers. Then in the same moment, the Spirit expands us—helping us out of our own perceptions and stories, helping us let go of our narrow viewpoints or rote habits, helping us drop our own fears and discomfort—to speak in the languages that are not as familiar. We are stretched and expanded, “to engage in new opportunities and bigger realities.” Friends, look around. Listen deeply. The Spirit is here again and again, inviting us to new opportunities. Thanks be to God. Let us move in the Spirit. Amen.

Benediction – Steve Garnaas-Holmes

On Pentecost the real miracle
 was not the momentary wonder
 of people speaking languages
 they hadn't been taught,
 but the lasting miracle
 of people making connections
 despite all their separations,
 discovering how they were alike
 despite apparent differences,
 knowing belonging
 despite their being foreign.

⁴ Matt Skinner, Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave podcast for May 28, 2023.

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They were one;
the boundaries did not exist.
They found a shared story,
tapped into the one Spirit
that breathed in them all.
Wonder at this:
not that you could
speak some foreign language
but that you could love someone
who speaks a foreign language,
knowing by listening that
your hearts speak the same language,
you and they breathe the same Spirit,
one breath in all of us,
members of one body.
Something divine is going on,
partly in your heart and partly in theirs.
Only together will you behold the miracle.