The Sounds of Intimacy

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Text: Acts 2:1-21

Link to Zoom recording [here](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/B8nM6m3OuATbk37fosuSS29NEd789yABLo6vCpe20PUWwUtd5nijwDVbpEgAk2nc.yOiG_MzKS5iSGEeH?startTime=1654437667000).

[Song](https://open.spotify.com/album/0nIQuaNYau4XVrOji5Bmct): Trompeta en Cueros, by *Grupo Folklórico Experimental Nuevayorkino*

Prophecies. Visions. Dreams. Tongues. The Spirit hovers among & between us & each of us is within the freshness of that wind…Sometimes we feel it. Sometimes we don’t…

But the disciples definitely felt it! Who could possibly imagine the force of the wind that arrived on Pentecost? In Acts 2:2, it says that a *sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven.* The text goes on in verse 3 by describing that the disciples *saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.*

It is exciting to me how the tongues seem to be distributed. That they are separated reflects the reality of limitations, that not all of us will speak every tongue. Perhaps the Spirit gives us 1 or 2 or a handful of tongues to speak…but even that is a huge surprise to the disciples, who originally envisioned their work as being more contained, as opposed to nourishing the entire diaspora of Jewish peoples.

Acts 2 is the beginning of a *revolution of intimacy[[1]](#footnote-1)*. It is the beginning of a radical process of *joining* in which the Jewish followers of Jesus begin to realize that they are joined to all Jewish peoples, regardless of their tongue. But this is just the beginning. God cuts through the boundary of tongues in today’s passage, but later on, the Spirit will reach across more borders & ethnicities & peoples. As we later read in Acts 10, God sends a Roman soldier & gentile — a non-Jew — named Cornelius to come to Peter’s town & bring him to his house. Peter is shocked by what God asks of him, which is to eat unclean food, to eat with this powerful outsider, to break the Jewish customs & say *yes* to a new command which is to break bread with any & all peoples.

Throughout the book of Acts, God’s uncontrollable & untamed Spirit is everywhere, breathing upon Jewish disciples & rich people & common folk & disabled bodies, imprisoned bodies & tanners & citizens & foreigners, drawing each to the other. God raises widows like Tabitha back to life. God sends Ananais to a murderer named Saul. In Acts 8, God lavishly loves the Ethiopian Eunuch, whose gender & sexuality we don’t know. In Acts 16, the Spirit saves the jailed & the jailer. God intentionally seeks out Timothy,the mixed-race disciple. The paralyzed man, Aeneas, is healed. The community organizer, Lydia, opens her home again & again & all these peoples are brought into the story of God, into a community where all are asking…*what is the Spirit about to do next?*

Twice in this passage from Acts 2, it mentions that the Jewish peoples from across the region were *amazed & perplexed* by these disciples;they were absolutely dumbfounded to hear Galileans speaking their tongue, their dialect, dragging out that syllable, rolling their Rs with ease, finding the right pitch of the nasal vowel, intonating certain words, using their idioms.

What Languages

In some ways, today’s membership celebration is kinda weird. We recommit to each other & to our inward practices — time in silence, time in prayer, attending retreats, walking with another member or a group in community, worshiping together. All these practices are, indeed, ways to access God.

But my sense is that this passage is much more a passage about our opening up to the world. This isn’t a passage about time in silence. This is not a passage that turns us inward. The great surprise of Pentecost is that God would have us look & see & find God in the cacophony, amongst and with the peoples outside of these four walls.

What if, today, this Potter’s House back room is like the room where the disciples were granted the Spirit? What tongues is the Spirit giving you to speak? What tongues is the Spirit asking your mission group to learn? What languages, what peoples are we being gifted?

Jennings says *to speak a language is to speak a people & that God speaks people fluently.*

From Multiplicity to Uniformity

As you all know, Christianity has mostly done the opposite. It’s been caught up in its own language, in its own piety, in its own doctrines, in its own denominational tedium, perhaps even, in its own spiritualism…creating hierarchies of superiority -- forgetting that the Spirit does not eliminate difference, but, rather, is so often the One who joins us in our vulnerabilities.

We sit in this room & speak English & it is hard to conceive of the multiplicity that has been stolen. That the transatlantic slave trade stripped so many people from their native tongues — the tongues of Cameroon & Senegal, of Guinea Bissaeu & Burkina Faso. T — hat the people who once spoke here — the Piscataway -- have lost all but about seventy-five words of their language. Crisely speaks to you in English & Spanish, but the Taíno is lost. I speak to you in English & Spanish, but I don’t know any Quechua. Cruz, & all those who speak Tz’utujil, know the cost of retaining a language & a culture.

I was in a mixed space a few months ago with a Korean woman. She spoke of an immense well of grief of having changed her name to English many years ago & of having lost her capacity to speak in her native tongue. Now, as a mother, she wonders what connections, what sounds, what culture she has to pass on her children.

So many of us of European descent know this loss from another angle, but we rarely perceive it as loss. We fail to grasp the richness of the languages our ancestors gave up. Our grandparents & great-grandparents forfeited their native sounds — German & Irish & Italian & Polish — in order to achieve white identity. Instead of a multiplicity of tongues, the Western world has become like a vortex driving us towards uniformity, seducing us with its speed & comfort.

POSE

Last year, I watched a television show called *Pose*, which follows a queer community in New York City during the AIDS epidemic in the late 80s & early 90s. About halfway through the first episode, I turned to Crisely & said something along the lines of, *I don’t think I want to watch this. It’s too vulgar for me.*

Captured in that line, in that hesitation, I think, was a kind of discomfort & fear. It was a bias that bubbled up in a moment, a bias against the language & gestures of LGBTQ people. The slang, the music, the modes of dress. The manner of walk & dance. The flamboyance. The multi-layered paradoxes & complexities that these peoples lived.

For years, I had thought of myself as actively affirming of sexualities & genders different from my own. But this show revealed a distance that I had maintained. That distance cultivated a desire for more distance. It exposed a homophobia that I didn’t think was within me.

In an episode we watched this week, a mother visits her gay son on his death bed. Surrounded by his friends, she apologizes for having not understood her son, and in a moment of remarkable generosity, a transgender woman puts her hand on the mother’s hand, and says, *Listen. No one is out here teaching parents how to accept their gay children. You can’t blame yourself for what you didn’t know.*

The characters that I initially wanted to turn away from became characters whom I grew to love. Through repetition, over time, God can create affinity & affection where we did not expect it.

Jennings writes: *God’s love presses us beyond quiet toleration. … If love is complete, learners of a language come to love the people — the food, the faces, the plans, the practices, the songs, the poetry, the happiness, the sadness, the ambiguity, the truth — and they love the place, that is, the circled earth those people call their land, their landscapes, their home. Speak a language, speak a people. God speaks people, fluently. And God, with all the urgency that is with the Holy Spirit, wants the disciple of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently, too.*

Finding God in the Tongues

Each of us is given tongues to speak, peoples to love. As we move towards our membership recommitment, I encourage you to ask what tongues you are being asked to speak.

Some of the tongues I am learning flow out of my own sense of what it means to come from & belong to two different peoples. In recent weeks, I’ve been so moved by Timothy’s place in the Acts trajectory. Instead of passing over the fact of his Gentile father & his Jewish mother, Jennings lifts it up. He writes: *the power of in-between existence is love without contradiction, and such love is always possible. It is possible for Timothy to love the Gentiles of his Father and the Jews of his mother and with both and through both and in both to perform his commitment to Jesus. This is the inner logic of a Christian — to perform multiple loves while loving Jesus.*

A couple of weeks ago, I saw a friend from preschool, Hayden Eilerman. I hadn’t seen him in about a decade & at this point in our lives, he & I probably agree on very little when it comes to theology or politics, but seeing him was a wonderful reminder of the rural peoples who raised & shaped me, with whom, from time to time, I am still called to love & quarrel & break bread. After we reconnected, I wrote him a poem.

The poem is fun & weird & meanders through that strange place I called home for many years, which was my parents’ pizzeria. It’s titled, “*To The Ham & Broccoli Pizza” (for Hayden),* (which you can hear on the [Zoom recording](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/B8nM6m3OuATbk37fosuSS29NEd789yABLo6vCpe20PUWwUtd5nijwDVbpEgAk2nc.yOiG_MzKS5iSGEeH?startTime=1654437667000).

In addition to re-membering my rural roots that are my own, part of my own sense of wholeness has been to return to some of the music that I grew up listening to with my father, to claim the importance of music and dance as tongues. My growing sense is that peoples who have had their tongues taken away are also the most likely to rework Spirit & language & sound into new tongues, into groans of the Spirit where God is improvising a new thing. This Wednesday, in our Acts group, Rev Lucy Perez suggested that this is what she called *the extra grace* in black worship.

I want to close with a poem & with a song snippet from an album in which a group of New York Latinos — mostly Puerto Ricans, Cubans, & Brazilians — joined together in New York City to experiment musically. Their first album was called *Concepts in Unity.* Their second album has a song called *Trompeta en cueros*, which literally translates to “Trumpet in Drums”. The song is arranged in a traditional Cuban form called Guaguancó. When you hear the song, you will notice how the conga drums — the *tumba* & the *quinto —* as well as the *chekeré —* which is a dried gourd with beans around it — all work together to surround the trumpet. Halfway through the song, there is a beautiful solo of a Cuban guitar, called the *tres*. In my mind, the *tres* serves as a kind of bridge or ladder between the low, deep sounds of the drums with the higher pitch of the trumpet.

[Song](https://open.spotify.com/album/0nIQuaNYau4XVrOji5Bmct) {0:00-2:00}

When I imagine this song being played, I imagine our community moving out with this music. Each instrument speaks its own language, as do each of us. Each instrument adds to the collective & the collective accentuates the differences, celebrating each sound’s unique offering.

The strength of our community lies in its capacity to celebrate & even protect our differences. This is the joy of claiming our identity as an ecumenical church, as opposed to a non-denominational church. Our differences are not to be feared, but rather, integrated into our expression of oneness. After all, this is Jesus’ prayer for us, that we would be One.

May this membership year be a time when we feel the trumpet of God straightening our spines, giving us the confidence to reach out, to embrace those disciples with whom God would surprise us, with whom God would have us join.

Poem Trompeta en Cueros can be heard on the [Zoom recording.](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/B8nM6m3OuATbk37fosuSS29NEd789yABLo6vCpe20PUWwUtd5nijwDVbpEgAk2nc.yOiG_MzKS5iSGEeH?startTime=1654437667000)

1. Dr. Jennings’ subtitle for his Acts commentary is *The Revolution of the Intimate.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)