

Bewildered

Acts 2: 1-17

May 23, 2021

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Most of the time when I think of the Holy Spirit, I think of quiet stirrings. I think of that still, small voice that speaks subtly. I think of a gentle breeze, offering a simple reminder of the divine presence among us. But in this Pentecost story, which is all about the Spirit's work in our midst, She is anything but quiet. In this story, the Spirit is not subtle or gentle. On Pentecost, the Spirit comes suddenly. The Spirit is mighty, and She is loud. On Pentecost, the Spirit draws a crowd — and when they encounter the works She calls forth, they are bewildered.

Accustomed to a world where people are kept apart by their differences in language, the faithful people gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost are bewildered to hear God's mighty works proclaimed to them in the multitude of their own languages. Accustomed to a world where their foreignness was viewed as a curse, the people gathered from all around the world are bewildered to hear the blessing of God's promises spoken in words they can understand. So bewildered, in fact, that they struggle to make sense of how this might be possible.

Though I sometimes say it as a joke, I really do believe that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways. I know it to be the mysterious work of the Spirit when a friend I haven't heard from in ages calls on just the day I most need to hear from them, or when I hear or read something that gives me just the inspiration I need. How exactly the Spirit goes about her work is certainly a mystery to me, but *what* is stirred in me and in others is not that surprising. That friend who called me out of the blue — I've long known her to be caring and thoughtful. That poem I read that seemed to be speaking directly to me — I've long known that poet to be incisive and wise. Which is to say: though the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, She does not conjure her work out of nothing. When the Spirit stirs us, She calls forth gifts that have been there all along, whether we recognized them or not.

My answer to the question about how it was possible for the apostles to speak so many languages is the fact that the gifts the Spirit calls from us have always been there. Maybe the apostles had grown up speaking the tongues of Parthia and Medes and Elam — but it had been years since they had uttered their first language. Maybe the apostles hadn't yet had a chance to share the love of God in the languages of Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. Maybe the apostles didn't think that knowing the tongues of Egypt and Libya, Rome and Crete was a big deal, and hadn't thought to mention it. Whatever their reasons for apparently suddenly speaking this wide variety of languages, the Holy Spirit called forth these gifts that had long been there, using them to express the love of God.

As far as I know, this congregation doesn't have untapped gifts for the languages of Phrygia and Pamphylia. But the Holy Spirit is at work in this community, continuing to call forth the gifts that have long been here. In the two years that I was your Student Minister, I have seen the Spirit

call upon the gifts that are a core of who this congregation is, that you might further extend your love of God and neighbor.

In my first months with you, I experienced your generous hospitality — expressed each week through a coffee hour that encouraged everyone to sit down and stay awhile. And I saw the Spirit use your gift for generous hospitality as the youth room remodel finished, and we blessed the offering of the space to the town's young people.

In my first months with you, I saw the deep bonds of friendship that unite this community — expressed through playful banter and close ties between families. And I saw the Spirit use your gift of friendship as the Small Groups began to form, and you drew those circles of friendships wider, including to people you met over Zoom.

From my very first minutes with this church, I experienced your openness to possibility — expressed through your willingness to learn and grow with me, receiving with grace the ministry I offered to you. And I saw the Spirit use your gift of openness when Father Bill's Shelter expressed a need for additional support, and you — not just the congregation, but your friends and neighbors too — were open to serving in a new way, putting together 4,000 bagged lunches over the course of the summer.

When I first began to get to know people in this church, I asked many of you what drew you here. Again and again I heard what peace you feel in the sanctuary, how music and prayer offered a chance to breathe, how hearing God's word proclaimed was a chance to reconnect with what matters most. Again and again, I would hear the gift you have for noticing the busyness and noise of the world, and your commitment to seeking out of Christ's peace. And when the pandemic kept you out of this beloved sanctuary, I saw the Spirit use this gift not only to keep you tuning into the livestream services, but in your sharing our worship with others who might also need a chance to breathe.

Like communities around the country, this congregation is grappling with what it means to engage in racial justice. This past year, you have struggled faithfully with the call to love our neighbors as our selves in a world where our race determines too much of our lives and livelihoods. Here, as in communities around the country, this work has not been easy or comfortable — or perfect. As in the country as a whole, this congregation's conversations have revealed painful divisions within a community that once felt united. And in the country as a whole, there is much work left to do. But this community is also different: you have the gift of a genuine desire to grow in faith, with curiosity about scripture, engagement in prayer, and a striving to better serve and love the world. You have the gifts of generous hospitality and friendship to ground you. You are open to possibility, and and you are aware of the pains of this world, seeking a place for Christ's everlasting peace.

At Pentecost, the Spirit loudly called forth the gifts of the apostles, drawing a crowd who could not believe their ears. But what if the gifts the Holy Spirit brought out had been there all along?

Perhaps the apostles had not noticed the differences within their community before the Spirit came rushing in. But when we respond to the Spirit's call, we learn something about our neighbors. We learn their needs and they learn ours, and we see the gifts borne of our similarities and our differences. The Spirit stirred the apostles and all who responded to Her bewildering call, into recognizing the diversity that had long been in their midst. The gifts they had to offer were *because of* their internal diversity, not in spite of it. The Spirit stirred them into recognizing that proclaiming the differences between them is what created the overlapping bonds that held them together as a community of faith.

On its face, the miracle in this story was that a diverse group of people heard the love of God proclaimed in their multitude of literal languages. But what if they heard something else when the Spirit's flames descended upon the apostles — not just different spoken tongues, but different languages of the heart, different ways of thinking and praying, different priorities for public life? What if the crowd also heard the apostles willing to express who they really are? And what if they also heard a willingness to express the love of God even when it seems foreign? What if they saw faithful people offering the gift of friendship out of their gratitude for the love they had received? What if they knew the apostles were extending generous hospitality out of their own experiences of being the stranger? What if they saw the community's openness to possibility as rooted in the various paths their lives had taken? What if they realized their seeking a place for peace was inspired by the variety of burdens and joys each one carried?

As we say goodbye and give God thanks for our journey together, I am grateful for the chance to know you and to have been your Student Minister. Though we will no longer join in ministry together, I want to echo what many of you have said to me these past weeks: I am so excited for the work God will continue to do through you.

On this Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit is present, and She has gathered a crowd. The Holy Spirit has been stirring and will continue to call forth gifts from you people of faith — and the results? ...Might be bewildering.