

## The Miracle of the Ear

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The very first church I served was a new church plant and one of the very first things we did was to have a Friday youth night – the idea to give kids a safe place to hang out where they would have fun and not get into too much trouble. Most of the kids came to dance or play games or talk to their romantic interests. But one kid had something else in mind. Kenny came one Friday night, very well dressed, and wanted to spend most of the evening talking to me – about politics. Kenny was the captain of his school’s debate team and since this was 2008, the conversation in his nearly all black school was all about Barack Obama possibly being the first black president of our country. Kenny had recently played Obama in a mock debate. So whereas with most kids, my conversation went something like this, “Hey, how’s it going? How’s football? How’s band?” And on their end, “You got anything to eat?” or “Change the music to a better song,” my conversation with Kenny, after a few pleasantries, began with him saying, “What do you think about Obama’s Iranian disarmament policy?” Now I hate to admit this to you, but I had not spent a great deal of time reading up on Obama’s Iranian disarmament policy and so, assuming that Kenny liked Obama, I just said something like, I’m sure it’s really good. Well, Kenny actually didn’t think it was that great. He used words like overly simplistic and naïve. He did like Obama; he just thought he had some better ideas – than Obama and than me.

I really liked Kenny for a number of reasons, but one is that he reminded me of me when I was in high school, except for me, my topic was not politics but religion. You see, I was that kid that was in church all the time. And unfortunately for my youth directors, I was that kid who would correct them if I ever thought they got some obscure Bible reference wrong – I was really cool as a teenager. But here’s the thing, I loved church, I loved learning about God and the Bible and theology, and that was a great part of my childhood. But also because I did attend church so much and because I did think about theology so much, in some ways I had become too familiar with certain stories and thus closed off to other ways of thinking about Scripture and faith and theology.

Today’s passage is an example. For people like me who grew up in the church, this story is a common one. It’s usually read every year on Pentecost, the day we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to the early church. And this story has a familiar interpretation – the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to proclaim the gospel. Red is the liturgical color for Pentecost as you see it draped over our altar today. At my service of ordination, I was given a red stole (in fact, this is the one I received at my ordination) because it signifies that the Church believes the Holy Spirit has empowered me to proclaim the gospel. The Holy Spirit has given me a tongue to speak.

That’s the familiar interpretation of this story. And it’s a good interpretation. We certainly affirm that the Holy Spirit empowers us to speak. But the problem with familiar interpretations is that it is easy to think they are the only interpretation. Rabbi Jonathan Miller was the long time rabbi of the largest Jewish synagogue in Birmingham and was always one of the key leaders in any interfaith work going on in the city. Over the years, I was in a number of different

meetings with him and during one meeting, Rabbi Miller was leading the devotional and he said, "There's a Jewish saying that the Torah has 7 faces," meaning that you don't have to pick a single right interpretation of Scripture but that one Scripture can reveal multiple deep truths (even sometimes opposite truths). Rabbi Miller went on to say, sort of tongue in cheek, "The only people who think you have to find one, single, solitary truth are you Christians." Recognizing that rarely is there a single interpretation (especially of passages that are very familiar) can open us up to more of what the Spirit has to say to us.

A number of years ago, I had that type of experience with this story in Acts, the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Eric Law, an Episcopal Priest, in a book called *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, asked a simple question about the story in Acts that has changed the way I understand this story: "Is this a miracle of the tongue or of the ear?"

Is this a miracle of the tongue or of the ear?

Is the work of the Holy Spirit that the apostles were given tongues to speak or that the crowds were given ears to hear?

It's a fascinating question. And one that has almost always been answered – the tongue. But I think we limit the work of the Holy Spirit when we think about it only in that way. So let me share with you Law's interpretation:

After asking if it's a miracle of the tongue or the hear, he asks who has more power in the story – the disciples or the crowds. Prior to this point, after the resurrection, nearly every time we see the disciples, they are hiding behind locked doors, afraid that the same people who came to arrest Jesus might come after them. The crowds, on the other hand, are free to move about the city. In that context, it's the crowds, not the disciples, who are more free and who have more power...at least until the Holy Spirit comes. So it's not just anyone who is given tongues to speak, but it is the powerless and the fearful. And it's the free and powerful who are given ears to hear.

That's a little different take isn't it? But I think a really important one for us to consider. Because it changes how things normally work. Normally, the powerful speak and the powerless are the ones who are expected to listen. But according to Law, part of the work of the Holy Spirit is that those who normally speak learn to listen and those who normally are silent, find their voice. This is even more profound when we consider that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. What if the Church is the place that talks and listens differently from how the world does. The Church is the place where those of us with power learn to listen and the Church is the place where those who are without power or those who are scared find their voice. What if that is just as much part of the work of the Holy Spirit as say the Holy Spirit speaking through preachers as this red stole demonstrates.

This work of the Holy Spirit has implications that are both practical and transformative.

How many of you have ever been at a meeting where it seemed like no one was listening to each other, but were just talking past each other. What if we prayed, Holy Spirit help us to speak and to listen?

How many of you have ever heard it said, “You know, I just can’t stand that person. All they do is listen. They just listen too much?” But all of us have either said that or heard it said about someone who talks to much, right?

And I know that none of you have ever complained about how long the pastor talks during a sermon, but it does happen, right?

You see, it’s not that the traditional interpretation of Pentecost is wrong. I certainly hope the Holy Spirit speaks through me every week when I’m preaching. But, rather, it’s that interpretation by itself is incomplete because we all need God’s help to both speak and to listen to each other. And when all of us learn to speak and listen well, what an incredible community we have and what an opportunity to have an impact in the world. Because, you see, it’s not just a few of us that the Holy Spirit is empowering to speak, but all of us – especially those who have not often had their voice heard.

When the disciples do finally speak, what comes out is one of the most powerful and beautiful scenes in all of Scripture – the good news of Jesus Christ being proclaimed so that every one hears it in their own native language. Pentecost teaches us that the gospel is bigger and more diverse than any single language, culture, or experience. But sadly, too often Christian theology has been done from limited perspectives. Recently, James Cone, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest theologians died. Cone was an African American theologian who was the grandfather of what came to be known as black liberation theology. He was controversial because he challenged the status quo. But he has been essential for the theological world having a deeper sense of what God is doing in the world. Because you see, Cone was doing theology from the experience of a black person in a country that for much of his life and still in many ways is deeply racist. His experience as a black man is different than the experience of white theologians and, therefore, he had something to say that the church needed to hear, so by the Spirit empowering James Cone to speak, the Church has a wider and deeper sense of the diverse community that makes it up.

In recent years, a field of theology called queer theology has found its footing and voice. And it’s simply people doing the work of theology from the experience of being LGBTQ. Feminist theology is the work of doing theology from the experience of women in a patriarchal and sexist context. And my wife, Mary Page, is working on a PhD in theology and mental illness. What does theology from the perspective of those with mental health challenges look like?

Now, here’s the thing, all of these theologies are controversial and they tend to make people defensive. So let me be clear, to affirm black liberation theology, or queer theology, feminist theology, or disability theology does not mean that we don’t also affirm the experience of white people or straight people, or of men. Rather, it means that our point of view as a church

has often been limited to that of people like me and people like James Cone are a gift that has helped to broaden our understanding of who we are as a church and of what God is doing in the world.

But we have to have the ears to hear those other voices and perspectives. I think the first work of the Holy Spirit then is to help us know that we are loved just as we are so that we don't have to be defensive and feel threatened when we hear other perspectives. You are good as you are. You don't have to be anything other than who you are. Your experience is important and true.

But...here's the thing – your experience is also only your experience. My experience is only my experience. We cannot assume that other people's experience is the same as ours. And that's why it's so important to listen without being defensive. By affirming black liberation theology or queer theology or feminist theology, we are not denying the validity of other experiences, but we are saying that we need to hear those perspectives to have a more complete understanding of what God is doing in the diverse body we call the Church. And once we can listen without being defensive, then we can see that our diversity is actually a gift.

Now, I've talked a lot about that gift in the world of theology. But I want to end by talking about that gift for us as a congregation, as a community of people. Because we are a congregation made up of people from various perspectives, all of us are better off because we've all been able to learn from each other as we tell and listen to our stories. And my guess is that if you've taken the time to really get to know someone and listen to someone who, in some ways, has a different experience than you do, you've learned something important.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit took a group of Jewish people and helped them see that the good news of Jesus Christ was for every person of every language of every culture and every place. But the only way that could happen is if they learned that their perspective was simply one perspective and they needed the Spirit not only to proclaim the gospel but to listen to those with different experiences.

Friends, we live in a time with a lot of shouting going on. A lot of folks are quick to shout about why their side, their views, their way is right. But this is a time that seems like not a whole lot of listening is happening. As Eric Law helped us to see, it's time for us to reclaim listening as the work of the Holy Spirit. For only in doing so, are we able to imagine and live into the diverse future that God has for us – both here at First Congregational and for the Church Universal throughout the world.

So come Holy Spirit.

Give us tongues to speak

And give us ears to hear.