

Speaking with an Accent

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June 4, 2017

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

My first post-seminary ministerial gig was in Annandale, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC. Northerners consider Washington a *southern* city and southerners consider it a *northern* city. Whichever it is, I just know I hadn't been there long before I began to take some serious ribbing about my southern accent.

I didn't even know I *had* an accent. Like a fish who can't see the water he lives in, I wasn't aware of the softened consonants and slower cadences of my particular brand of English. But in an effort to fit in and frankly, not be dismissed as a country bumpkin, I got to work trying to sound like a generic, soulless newscaster.

One of my more memorable experiences in this remedial training was going to a pub at Princeton with some of my fellow students in the Doctor of Ministry program. After they'd had a few rounds while I, as a Baptist from the South, drank with restraint and discretion, they began trying to teach me to speak the difference in *pin*, "p i n" and *pen*,

“p e n.” I couldn’t even hear the difference, much less speak it. But all my buds from north of the Mason-Dixon Line found the whole thing uproariously funny while I sat there mystified.

Eventually, Bambi and I moved to Atlanta. And even though many Georgians don’t consider Atlanta part of the state, much less the South, we immediately heard and delighted in the Southern-speak all around us. It was to our ears a kinder, gentler form of the mother tongue, sprinkled with those lovely southernisms such as “Ya’ll,” “Bless your heart,” and “I’m fixin to.”

And there were some new twists, at least to our Tarheel-trained ears, such as calling one’s siblings “brothua” and “sistuh.” The long and the short of it was in Georgia, I didn’t have worry about my accent anymore. Finally, the world around me sounded like home.

So to me, one of the most revealing truths in the story of Pentecost is learning that God speaks with an accent. Not necessarily a southern accent, but whatever accent you grew up and feel most comfortable with. Because one mark of the Spirit’s presence is nuzzling up beside you and speaking, in your own language and accent, God’s murmurings of love.

Now granted, the rushing wind and flames of fire and the gift of tongues at Pentecost get all the press, which is understandable. Luke, the author of the story, means for us to notice that just as God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, complete with thunder and lightning and mighty winds, so God has shown up again in holy purpose and power.

But the point of the story is not the divine theatrics. That's just to make clear the source of the miracle. The point of the story is that the coming of the Holy Spirit gives those first believers the power to speak the gospel in all the languages of the known world. That's what's indicated in that sweeping arc of places with all those unpronounceable Bible names (Acts 2:9-11).

And what is it these Parthians and Medes, Egyptians and Romans find so shocking as windswept disciples babble with joy in the streets? That they each hear the good news of Jesus in their own native tongue. And even more so--as verses 6 and 8 make clear in the Greek of the New Testament--in their own native *dialect*. In other words, the Spirit speaks not just English, but east Texas English and Appalachian English and Bostonian English.

Thus, when Luke describes the gift of tongues, he's not talking about the incoherent, ecstatic speech Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians (chapters 12-14) and is common in Pentecostalism. The Greek word translated "tongues"--*glossolalia*--simply means "languages."

And as Luke makes clear no less than three times in his story (v. 6, 8, and 11), the miracle of Pentecost is that all those religious tourists in town for the feast of Pentecost hear the disciples' message in their own tongue and dialect.

Thus, the first mark of being a Pentecostal Christian--meaning one imbued with the Spirit and fire of Pentecost--is finding your own voice, speaking in your own unique accent, as you bear witness to the grace and goodness of God.

Some years ago in these parts, there was a young man who loved the guitar. He also felt a profound call to ministry, specifically, the ministry of music. But in that place

and time long--before so-called contemporary worship made guitar-strumming worship leaders common--it felt like he had to choose. In fact, when he first inquired about entering Wake Forest as a music major, he was told he would have to major in either voice or piano.

But fortunately, this Spirit-borne Tarheel clung to his dream. And by the time he matriculated at Wake, a new chair of the music department was willing to take a chance on a guitar-playing minister of music. So the department chair arranged for classical guitar lessons through the North Carolina School of the Arts. And in time, the young man who refused to sing somebody else's tune graduated as Wake's first classical guitar major.

By the time he got to seminary, youth musicals--complete with guitars and drums and electric keyboards--were the rage. There this guitar-wielding minister of music got a warmer welcome.

In time, he and his wife, whom he picked up in the alto section of the Wake Forest choir, landed here where he became our beloved Dr. Ken Wilson. Now he has taught generations of guitar students at Knollwood and helped a good number be admitted to guitar study at the School of the Arts, all while building a ministry of music at Knollwood that continues to astound and inspire.

It turns out the Spirit and Ken were right, and the naysayers were wrong.

So to the graduates we are recognizing this day, I'd encourage you to take a page from Dr. Wilson's play book: Don't let anybody else tell you who you are. Instead, listen for the voice and Spirit of God as you seek to discern the unique shape of your life's vocation. The world has plenty of clones already; what it aches for and longs for is an original,

someone who speaks and sings and lives the good news of Jesus in their own native tongue, dialect, and accent. No one else can tell the story, quite like you.

Which bring us to the second mark of a Pentecostal Christian, someone aflame with the Spirit's fire. And that is finding and claiming your gifts. Thank God, not everybody is called to be a minister of the *church*. Many indeed, most, are called to be ministers to the *world* by offering some useful service to their neighbors.

Here let's shift for a moment to another view of the Spirit's work: Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 1, he draws on a familiar analogy of the body and its many members. The human body is a whirling dynamo of unseen miracles of sight and sound, breath and blood, in which every part--no matter how seemingly unimportant--serves a vital function. This is something you'll intuitively understand if you've ever had a broken toe or a tiny boil on your eyelid that compromised some function previously taken for granted.

Even so, Paul insists that in the church, the body of Christ, everyone has a contribution to make. I take that to mean as a follower of Jesus, you're not called to do *everything* in service to God and neighbor; but you are called to do *something*.

Back in the sixties, Mother Teresa spent a week immersing some college students in service to the poor. When the week was over, the students had a debriefing session with the storied saint.

This was during the height of the cold war and one of the students asked, "So Mother Teresa, what are you doing to eliminate the threat of nuclear annihilation?"

Her response shocked the group. “Nothing,” she answered. “I have been called to care for the sick and dying of Calcutta. You go and save the world from nuclear destruction. Perhaps that is your calling.”

Finding the work that is uniquely yours to do is essential to living a happy, productive life. And a lot of this comes from paying attention to when and where your gifts are stirred by the needs around you.

Granted, some of us are blessed with day jobs that tap our gifts in a powerful and rewarding way, while some have to pursue that calling after hours or in retirement. But as a follower of Jesus, you have the gifts to do something that will make the world a better, safer place for all God’s children, be that teaching English to refugees, treating your children like the treasure they are, or becoming an advocate and defender of those getting pushed to the back of the bus in our own place and time.

After all, words are not the only way to proclaim and live the good news of Jesus with the force and fire of Pentecost. A gifted artist or attorney or financial advisor can do it too by quieting another’s fears, broadening their vision, and setting them free. That’s what the Spirit delights in doing: setting people free.

And finally, beyond speaking with your own accent, and finding and claiming your gifts, there is a third mark of a believer branded by the Spirit’s fire. And that is finding and forging your own deeply personal faith.

This message is powerfully conveyed in the divided tongues of fire that rest above the head of each disciple. As Luke tells the story, “And suddenly . . . there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were

sitting. *Divided tongues*, as of fire, appeared among them, and *a tongue rested on each of them.*”

In other words, Pentecost was not a Spirit-inspired experience of group-think. Pentecost was a shared experience in which each person experienced God’s presence in a deeply personal way.

On the shelves of our new Arts and Hearts room in the Wellness and Community Center (WCC) are several dozen clay candle holders. These candle holders are richly colored and textured, glossy and glazed, and no two are exactly alike. That’s because--my potter friend, Rodney Stilwell tells me--they have been through the fire.

Several of these lovely clay candle holders are on the communion table before you, bright with fire. Notice that above each rests its own “tongue of fire.” The candle holders are made even lovelier by the realization they were made by inmates participating in the Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries, which Rodney leads, as gifts for our congregation on the WCC Dedication Day.

Now according to Rodney, two things happens when clay pottery is fired in the kiln. In the first firing, all the moisture and impurities are forced out of the clay. And in the second firing, the molecular structure of the clay breaks down and then reforms, giving the clay a tremendous strength. That’s why clay pottery is a primary focus of archaeologists: it lasts forever. Yes, there is power in the fire: it reveals and purges, refines and strengthens.

What was it John the Baptist said about the One to come after him, the One whose sandals he was not worthy to untie? He said the One to come, the Messiah, would baptize not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit . . . and with *fire*.

Until your life has been touched by hardship, tragedy, or pain, it's hard to know what your faith is made of; it's hard to know if it's even for real.

But once your faith has been tried in the fire, and you've met God in the midst of adversity, then your faith has a resilience it lacked before. Granted, on the far side of the fire, you're not the same. But by the grace of God, you're better and stronger. And that's when you know you've been baptized by the Holy Spirit and by fire.

No, as Pentecost makes plain, God isn't interested in a cookie-cutter Christians. God is interested in setting you free to *be* who you are uniquely created to be and to *do* what you are uniquely called to do.

So quit trying to be somebody you're not. And for God's sake, in Jesus' name, and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, start being you.

Holy Fire of God, purge, refine, and strengthen us for the work that is uniquely ours to do. Make us joyous heralds of the good news of Jesus, unafraid to speak and live his truth, in our own native dialect and tongue. In his name we ask it. Amen.

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