

*Miracle of Hearing*  
John 3:1-17  
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**I**

I've heard it said that there is an important distinction often underappreciated in the Pentecost story. By the gift of the Spirit, everyone gathered at the table begins to speak a different language. But twice Luke offers a clarification: this is not so much a miracle of speaking but of hearing. "Amazed and astonished," they asked, "how is it that we hear each other in our own native language?"

I read the passage multiple times every year and I'm still fuzzy on the details. Is it that these people from different places share a common language when they are together but speak different languages when they are apart? Maybe Luke means that on Pentecost they abandoned the lingua franca to speak to each other from their different tongues. As if you were going to the Carrboro Farmer's Market, where everyone speaks English to conduct business, but of course you can hear in the background private conversations that reflect the many different communities that come to this place: Spanish, Chinese, dialects of Karen. But imagine that one day all the transactions take place in the native language of each buyer or vendor. The miracle is that everyone is heard and understood even as they speak from different languages.

Or maybe Luke remembers something a little different. He emphasizes hearing more than speaking. So it may be that the Spirit intercedes for them so that the speaker's words are interpreted for the ears of the hearer. The Holy Spirit is your inner interpreter, conveying personally for you what you need to hear in the way you need to hear it. What John said in English Paula heard in Spanish. The Jews heard in Hebrew. Egyptians heard in Arabic. Cretans heard in Greek.

Luke's recollection of this event won't satisfy those desiring an exact accounting of the historical details. The Pentecost is as much a miracle as the incarnation or the resurrection. What's asked of us is that we take this story as an article of faith and imagine how we would organize our lives if it were true. What if we lived our lives as if everyone could speak and hear in their own native language? Any way you cut it, what occurred on Pentecost is extraordinary. It's a miracle because it disrupts everything that we have come to expect about power in community. Here is a group of people where everyone has a voice - and, no less importantly, everyone's voice is heard by others. We belong to a God who empowers us to speak. We belong to a God who helps us to hear.

**II**

Well, Pentecost was last week - why revisit it today? One answer to that question is that our tradition teaches us to organize our common life as if Pentecost has occurred. The liturgy geeks among us know that the Sundays in the longest season of the church year, so called ordinary time, are also known as the Sundays *After Pentecost*. This little preposition is important because it signals that something must be different. In the life of any family or nation we will say that things happened before or after some significant event. Nothing was ever the same *after* 9/11. Nathan finally settled down *after* his daughter was born. So it is that we have been fundamentally changed by this revelation of God. There was a time when things were different. There was a day when some people were prevented from speaking. There was a day when we could not hear or listen or

understand. But things are different now because we are living *after Pentecost*. Everyone has a voice. Everyone can be understood.

### III

In the wake of any big, unsettling event it takes time and space to adjust to the new reality. Even weeks or months after a birth, after a death, after a change, after a crisis, after a miracle - you'll find people who are still processing. That's Nicodemus, still processing. A curious but unconvinced Rabbi approaching Jesus by night, he comes probing and testing, weighing what he is now told against what he has always been told. He has experienced the ministry of Jesus for himself, so he holds these new revelations in balance with his tradition. We witness Nicodemus in the process of reorganizing his world according to these events. In Nicodemus's before, he was comfortable in the assurances of his tradition, he was secure in the precepts of his faith, he was privileged in his position as a "teacher of Israel." But now his world has been turned upside down and he is living in the first days of the great *after*. The scene is an intimate dialogue. You have to imagine their faces close, their voices hushed, their figures illumined by the light of a candle. Nicodemus speaks and Jesus responds. I have so much empathy for Nicodemus because I have been in his situation before. "How can these things be?" he asks. Nicodemus is any of us learning to trust in a new truth. Of course the last thing Nicodemus needs is for anyone to explain it to him again. He won't be convinced by argument or persuasion. He's already listening to what God has been saying - that's why he's so troubled in the first place. So don't tell him that he's got it wrong. Don't push him to move faster than he's ready to go. As he wrestles with these new disclosures, he needs to be heard by another as much as he needs to hear. Jesus listens as much as he speaks.

### IV

Luke says that Pentecost was a day of "dancing flames" as of fire. What an image for the give and take of speaking and hearing. We dishonor the miracle of Pentecost when we sentimentalize it as an amusing chorus of different tongues and dialects. I knew a guy in divinity school who loved our diversity so much that in conversation he would start to mimic the accent of whoever he was talking to. In those days I spoke with a pretty thick southern accent. I don't think he was aware of this unfortunate habit that he had, which to me did not convey appreciation of our difference so much as indulgence in it.

So it's not just about the gift of speaking; it's also the miracle of hearing. The truth is we don't fully understand what happened on that day - and we are all a little like Nicodemus about it, still perplexed and unpersuaded. To me it seems like hardly a miracle that anybody might find something to say. We are a people who are always talking. Our outward words deflect from the inner truths. What's miraculous is the change that comes with hearing. That kind of transformation is slow and uncelebrated. Don't mistake the Pentecost as divine permission to talk out of turn. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the maturation of our ability to listen.

When I quiet myself, sit attentively, and listen - no matter where I am - I am almost always surprised by what I begin to hear in the background that I had not noticed before. When my attention is divided, my hearing is the first thing to go. And it's often the case that the first step in reconnecting with where I am and who I'm with is to stop and listen and notice what I start to hear. I don't mean to diminish those who don't have the ability to hear. What I'm talking about is not the physiology of perceiving sounds. I'm talking about the spirituality of listening with the heart.

That is what it means to live *after Pentecost*. It is the new reality. Now we trust everyone may speak with the voice of God. Now we are able to listen with the love of Christ.