

Finding Our Tongues

Acts 2:17



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In his book *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*, sociologist of religion Timothy J. Nelson writes about religious experience and ritual in an African American church. Over the course of his research, he comes to the conclusion that there is a correlation between charismatic, Spirit-filled styles of worship and skepticism: the greater the emphasis on Spirit, the higher the level of suspicion. Listen to his description of an ordinary Spirit-filled Sunday worship service at Eastside Chapel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina:

The congregation was very quiet during the Scripture reading and remained quite still for the several minutes it took Reverend Drayton to set out her general theme and establish her rhythm. Then she moved out from behind the pulpit . . . and the people started to come alive. It happened gradually. At first one person in the choir stood up. Then. . . another choir member stood up. Then more choir members stood, and then people in the congregation started standing up, until after several minutes almost the whole choir and about half of the congregation were on their feet. Several responses became louder and more emphatic. Several women choir members in the front started smiling and waving their arms at Reverend Drayton in a “go on now” motion. The drummer tossed a drumstick in the air and caught it again with a flourish. People began clapping and shouting back at her during the response time in cadence. One young man in a black suit and red shoes started running to the front of the center aisle, pointing his finger and shouting at her, then running back to his seat. He did this over and over. The organ and drums started chiming in during the response times, building in volume and emphasis until finally at the end of the sermon they took the congregation immediately into song. [To the music], several women began to shout in earnest, moving out to dance in the unconfined spaces of the aisles and in front of the pulpit. One woman in a green and white checked dress began jumping around on both feet, like a child on a pogo stick. Four or five women ushers ran to her and tried to put their arms around her, but she still jumped. . . . After about half a minute she ended up prone on the floor with a white linen cloth covering her legs. . . . The energy level began to subside and the service continued with the hymn of meditation (145-6).

In his assessment, sociologist Timothy Nelson explains that, in the charismatic worship services that he observed, there were congregational norms that governed Spirit-filled behavior, and sometimes the pastor had to address and admonish church members to avoid behaviors that would fall outside those norms. When someone began to shout and dance ecstatically, for example, that person would be immediately surrounded by ushers of the same sex who would link arms around the shouter so that the shouter, who may have no consciousness of those around him/her, would not cause or come to any injury (161). Timothy Nelson goes on to explain that by not surrounding someone who begins to act ecstatically, ushers can withhold legitimacy from people whom they suspect aren't “for real” (161). This is what happened to one congregant Mona Lisa Scott. When Mona Lisa danced and the ushers did not surround her, Mona Lisa felt persecuted by church members and complained that they did not think she was “for real” (141).

Ever since the first Pentecost, there has existed a suspicion that some claims about the Spirit aren't for real. Sometimes it is suspicion that non-Christians cast on Christians or that some Christians cast on other Christians. And at times, it may be suspicion that Christians cast on themselves, as they raise and wrestle with questions about whether or not they have ever really felt the Spirit, been moved by the Spirit, been filled with the Spirit. No one wants to be duped. Just as people in the crowd, upon seeing and hearing the apostles speak for the first time in languages they had never learned, were so amazed and bewildered that they

suspected the apostles to be drunk instead of empowered by the Spirit, Christians throughout history have had a difficult time believing in the reality of the Spirit.

In fact, when we read the bible, we see that faithful people have always struggled with the fear that their religious convictions might be a sham. The Gospels themselves expect doubt. Christ asks his followers, "Do you still not see or understand?" "Are your hearts hardened?" When a father brings his sick child to Jesus, the father begs Jesus to heal his child, saying, "Lord, I believe." But then he adds, "Help my unbelief." Even the apostle Paul, as convicted as he was, recognized that so much about God's reality, Christ's reality, and the Spirit's reality remains a mystery.

For now we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;
but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.
When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.
For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Uncertainty, incomplete knowledge, doubt, and questions - these are not necessarily obstacles to faith. What I mean to say is that our faith is not at stake when we ask questions that cannot be answered.

Here in this congregation, confirmands are required to write personal statements of faith as well as a collective affirmation of faith. On the evening when they meet with the Session to be received into full membership of the church, the confirmands are asked to read their personal statements of faith. I would encourage you to pick up a copy of their statements as you leave the Sanctuary today. While each statement is distinctive, they share in common a kind of humility, a recognition that they haven't yet made sense of their religion, especially its claims about Jesus being resurrected from the dead or the miracles narrated in the bible, which would seem to contradict claims made by science. They express a kind of humility also with regard to their spiritual experiences. Having experienced fleeting moments memorable enough to write about, experiences that may have taken place in nature, at Massanetta church camp, in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, or through music or in service or in community, they nevertheless do not claim with 100% certainty that God or the Spirit was present in those experiences. I appreciate the humility with which these statements of faith were written. It is hard to find our voice in speaking about our faith, because faith does not lead to black-or-white answers or either-or choices. Faith is not a matter of insisting that you either believe this or you don't.

I remember a conversation that I had with my parents on the eve of my confirmation. I knew that the next morning, my fellow confirmands and I would be examined by the Elders on Session. We would be asked questions about the bible, the history of the church, the tenets of the Reformed tradition - all things we had studied over the course of the year - and we would be asked about our faith. I wasn't too worried about being able to answer questions about the bible and the history of the church; I had taken good notes. I was worried that someone would ask me what I believed. Did I believe in the existence of God? Did I believe that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God and that he was resurrected from the dead? How could I know these things for sure? Worried as I was, this was the question I asked my parents. I don't remember what questions, in the end, the Session asked us or what my responses were. I do remember, however, how my parents responded to me. They said that though they cannot know these things for certain, they have chosen to live *as if* they are true. As they shared this with me, I remember thinking to myself how they didn't seem at all worried.

Faith is a matter of trusting in something *as if* it were true. Despite war, crime, and violence, having faith in God means that we can live *as if* God created the world and called it good. Despite the sin that I know exists in me and in others, having faith in Christ means that I am going to live *as if* forgiveness is possible for everyone. Despite the way things have been and the way things are, having faith in the Spirit means that we can live *as if* we are a new creation. Despite the divisions that exist among peoples, races, and nations, having faith in God means that we can live *as if* we are all children of God, made in God's image. Despite the

injustices that play out in our society, having faith in God means that we will live as if God's justice reigns. Faith is a decision to live *as if* a set of fantastic claims are real.

Tanya Luhmann, a psychological anthropologist, remembers teaching a seminar on divinity and spirituality and seeing "the blank non-comprehension" of "decent, smart, empathic people who seemed to stare at each other across an abyss." As she explains it, "the skeptics did not understand the believers, and the believers did not understand the skeptics. They did not even know how to get from here to there" (*When God Talks Back*, xix). So she set out to understand how God becomes real to people. Using her best anthropological tool, that of observation, Dr. Luhmann discovered that understanding how God becomes real to people has very little to do with belief per se. For the people she spent the most time observing, she likened the process of learning to know God as real as "a slow process, stumbling and gradual, like learning to speak a foreign language in an unfamiliar country, with new and different social cues" (xxi).

On that first Pentecost, Luke portrays the apostles' reception of the Holy Spirit as marked by xenolalia, the speaking in foreign tongues. The apostles suddenly speak in languages that had been foreign to them before. Many of you have some experience speaking in a language other your own. You have experienced the effort that it takes to approximate what you are trying to say. You have experienced the vulnerability of trying to be understood. Learning to speak authentically about our faith, learning to speak for real about God may at first feel like trying out a foreign tongue. And at first, we may receive from others stares of blank non-comprehension, even skepticism that we are for real. Skepticism and the Spirit have always gone hand-in-hand. And perhaps at first, just as it was on that first Pentecost, this is as it should be, until, little by little, with practice and lived experience we speak of the good news *as if* it were real news and thereby gain such fluency that the good news can be received by all who hear of it.