

O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing

Believe OUT LOUD Power Summit--10.9.10

Acts 2:1-16

Rev. Rebecca Voelkel

Most amazing and powerful, gentle and loving God, you blow through our lives, touching and transforming. Touch and transform us now, we pray. Touch my mouth and all of our hearts so that the words about to be spoken and the words about to be heard might be your word and not simply our own.

I can remember the exact day. I can remember the exact time. I can remember the exact pew I was sitting in—and who was next to me...

They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven, there came a sound like a rush of a mighty wind...

I had gone to Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ on Capitol Hill in Seattle because my new boss had suggested it. I got there characteristically late and slipped into one of the pews in the back.

Now, I had grown up a double PK (a preacher's kid, both my parents were UCC clergy) in a very progressive denomination and in very supportive congregations. But I wasn't prepared for that moment at Pilgrim when the Rev. Debra Peevey, a visiting Disciples preacher from Findley Street Christian Church, mentioned in an offhanded way during her sermon that she and her partner, Candy, had gone to some event over the weekend...

...like the rush of a mighty wind...

I have to tell you, my life was changed. She preached the gospel in her sermon, and it was a powerful sermon. But Pilgrim and Debra **embodied** the gospel for me that day in a way it had never been before in my life. I had, quite simply, never thought (even in my progressive congregation) that my lesbian self and my religious self might attend the same worship service. But there she was, an out lesbian, proclaiming the gospel, and the Holy Spirit visited me.

So I stand before you today deeply honored, deeply indebted to each and every one of you for the ways in which you have already embodied the gospel—in your local congregations, in your denominations, in your communities—so that others like me might know, in their bodies and souls, the presence of the Holy Spirit. If only the young men who have taken their own lives in these past few weeks would have known you and your churches...

If all we accomplish this weekend is to convey our deep gratitude for you in a way that you can feel in your bones, we will have accomplished a lot. Thank you.

[pause]

But, as is often the case in Scripture—we are called, because of our gratitude—to deeper reflection, to deeper faith, to deeper action. So let me share with you a bit more of where this text has taken me as I've prayed and struggled with it.

[pause]

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven 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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

As you know, the Book of Acts is Part Two of the story written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. While Part I (the gospel of Luke) is about the life of Jesus, Part II (the Book of Acts) is the story of the early church. Now, I have to be honest that most scholars are pretty clear that the Book of Acts is an idealized version of the early church, not really a true picture. Instead, Acts portrays the aspirations and the vision of what ought to be. While some folks have dismissed Acts as fantasy, I have to say what our early church forebears BELIEVED the church should be seems an important message for us....

So, the disciples are gathered together in a room and this wind, this fire, this presence blows in and gives the disciples the ability to speak in many different languages.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'

So the disciples are all together, but there's also this crowd of folks gathered around, too. Now, it's important to remember that at this point, the Christian community is a sect within Judaism and they are already struggling with who is a "real" Jewish Christian. Do you need to be part of the inner circle? Do you need to live in Jerusalem or have known Jesus? Who's in and who's out—the questions have already begun...

So, you have the "insiders," the folks who knew Jesus and you have the "outsiders," the crowd gathered around. And, if you miss that this is a group of outsiders, the text explicitly tells us, as Russell read, that they are from all over the world, speaking many different languages, having different customs and different ways of being.

And what does the Holy Spirit do as her first act upon the early church? She pours herself upon those gathered so that each is empowered to remain themselves AND be gathered into one body. Do you see that? Language is one of those things that both shapes and symbolizes us. Our language can indicate our culture, our customs, our community. And the Holy Spirit's first act, according to Luke, is to pour herself upon those standing around and gather them together—radical equals yet losing none of their particularities. I find this paradox of radical connectedness and liberating particularity incredibly important.

[pause]

In 1987, I was part of a delegation that spent a week in Santa Marta, El Salvador. We were part of the "Accompaniment Movement" that was seeking to have a religious presence in protest of the death squads and violence of the US-backed Salvadoran government. One of the most important moments of that trip that really marked my coming to faith in an adult way happened when I met a woman

who was a “delegate of the Word.” These Bible study leaders were often the ones whom the death squads targeted first in order to terrify the entire community. In telling us about her work as a Bible study leader she told us she had lost five children to the civil war, one of which she’d seen tortured to death. When I asked her how it was that she had survived, let alone continue to be a leader, she said:

“I have been able to survive because I know that in Jesus Christ, God knows in His body what it means to be tortured to death. So my son did not die alone, but being held in God’s arms. And in the resurrection, God has said, once and for all, that life and love are stronger than death. So, it doesn’t matter what they try to do to me. Even if they kill me, I know that God will resurrect me. And that makes me powerful.”

Now, as I said, I am a double-PK and I have heard a lot of sermons over the course of my life. Many of them have been brilliant. But no one has spoken more powerfully about the meaning of what God has done in Jesus Christ than that fearless, powerful Salvadoran woman. And to her, I owe the debt of my faith.

Her words taught me that faith is not something that is practiced once or twice a week as an optional activity, but is, instead, literally necessary for survival. Furthermore, faith is that which compels us to act to make the world more like God would have it to be: just and abundant and joyous.

The other important lesson that experience taught me is the same that the Holy Spirit blowing through the disciples and the crowd offers—that Salvadoran woman spoke of God to me and revealed to me a faith I had but didn’t know. And she spoke to me out of the specifics of her life, her body, her story, her culture. Radical connectedness, liberating particularity.

[pause]

The thing about the Scriptures is that, if we miss the point, they are often right there to remind us—again and again. Such is the case with the writer of Acts. Our Pentecost story is found in Chapter 2 but only a few chapters later, they’re still asking, “now remind me, who’s in and who’s out? I know that it’s not just those Jewish Christians who knew Jesus. But who else is in??” The text gives us a

wonderful story about Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch. And then a little while later, there's the story of Peter's dream and his encounter with Cornelius.

The Ethiopian eunuch, you might recall was an assistant to the Queen. As was the custom in that day, the men who served the Queen were often castrated, making them eunuchs. The term eunuch was also used to describe men who did not have sex with women or whose gender was somehow different from other men. Some scholars have suggested that eunuchs and the Bible's treatment of eunuchs ought be analogous to lgbt folks.

When Philip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch, both a gentile and a sexual minority, Philip's response is to recognize the fruits of the Spirit which are so visibly present in him in the Ethiopian eunuch. Likewise, when Peter encounters, experiences, learns from the faith of Cornelius, he is transformed.

The arc, the trajectory of the Book of Acts—the vision and dreams of the early Church—is for ever-expanding, ever-widening circles of radical connectedness and liberating particularity. The gentile does not become a Jew. The eunuch does not stop being a eunuch—instead their bodies, their cultures, their languages become part of the way in which God is revealing Godself to the world.

So what about us? What about this gathering?? What about our roles, our ministries?

I don't believe there is an essential queerness. I don't believe that all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, same-gender loving, questioning, intersex folks have some shared gene or hairstyle or even context. I know, for instance, that I disappoint my colleague David on a daily basis because I know not anything Broadway musical....

But I do believe that the experience of marginalization; the experience of discernment and grappling with coming out; the ways in which we experience our bodies—our sexuality, our gender, our presentation—can provide us with a kind of parable about God that not everyone else has. This is true for those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, same-gender loving, intersex **and** those who identify as straight but who ask the questions and stand on the margins and work in the movement—these, I believe, are queer, too.

Queerness can give us clues about the queerness of God. Coming out in a world that values you not, yet affirming your God-given gifts can give us an eye for the ways in which not everything that the culture teaches is to be bought, literally, or believed.

In a world that worships violence, money and oppressive power—God’s love, witnessed in the solidarity of the cross and poured out indiscriminately and passionately by the Holy Spirit—that kind of love, is queer.

In a country where we spend so much energy erecting walls and passing anti-immigration bills and calling our Muslim brothers and sisters terrorists—God’s love manifested in so-called foreigners to Jerusalem and so-called outsiders—is queer.

The God upon whose name we call, who became human in the man of Nazareth, who poured out Her spirit upon the early church and upon us-- stands against systems of oppression to proclaim that Love is stronger than death and vulnerability is power. In our world, in our country, these are queer things.

And I believe that one of the charisms, one of the gifts of the queer community is that so many of us have had to face into choosing authenticity over acceptance, we’ve had to claim that we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free. And my hope is that we, as queer people, can share our charism, our gifts to the church. And, maybe, just maybe, we might help our church root itself in the queerness of God.

[pause]

I had a seminary professor, David Bartlett, a great American Baptist preacher, who once told of his love of the hymn “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”. He said God is so big and mysterious and wondrous and expansive and extravagant that we simply cannot afford to lose even one voice as we sing of God. We need every one of us, in our blessed particularity, to sing of God’s love and power and justice if we are ever going to approach even a whisper of God’s grandeur.

So, queer folks, let's sing and minister and bring our blessed particularity and invite others' blessed particularity to the radical connectedness God invites us to. Let's Believe OUT LOUD.

Amen and amen.