

Reading: Acts 2 1-15

¹When the day of Pentecost came,
they were all together in one place.

²Suddenly a sound
like the blowing of a violent wind
came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire
that separated and came to rest on each of them.

⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under
heaven.

⁶When they heard this sound,
a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his
own language.

⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?"

⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?

⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites;

residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹

^oPhrygia and Pamphylia,

Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene;

visitors from Rome

¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs—

we hear them

declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

¹²Amazed and perplexed,

they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³Some, however, made fun of them and said,

"They have had too much wine."^[b]

¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the Eleven,
raised his voice and addressed the crowd:

"Fellow Jews

and all of you who live in Jerusalem,

let me explain this to you;

listen carefully to what I say.

¹⁵These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!

Ephesians 5:19-21

18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is stupidity, but be filled with the Spirit and constantly guided by It. 19 Speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to God; 20 always giving thanks for all things..

Sermon

The diversity among human beings is not a new concept. In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures it was God's hand who separated the people. There are creation stories all across the globe with similar themes. Early in Genesis. Humanity is created in the image and the likeness of God...

And Then, Yahweh discovers the people building a tower into the heavens so they ***can make a name for themselves.***

“If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do *this*, Yahweh says in Genesis chapter 6, then *nothing* they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

These stories exist across cultures and have lasted generation after generation because they explain something that resonates deep within with the human experience. Our separation from one another *feels* psychologically true. There seems to be a common human experience that humanity has been scattered. We have been divided as a people. There is a feeling of loss..a longing.

We are divided in this country, in this movement, in our cities even in our churches. We have different and unique experiences, different understandings of how we have come to be who we are, different meanings that we make about what our purpose in life is and how to express it. For all that we might have in common.. we cannot truly, completely, totally ever understand what it means to *be* someone else. As people of this free faith, we hold this diversity *as a value*, I would even say as *sacred* as something that makes us better, stronger..... even more beautiful. In our tradition, It is in our diversity, not just in Unity that we reflect the Holy. It is reflected in our principles... the Inherent worth and dignity of all Human beings and the Interdependent web of which we are all a part. We often seek even crave diversity, visible diversity, but ***real*** difference, the kind that pushes us to the edge of our comfort zone, the kind of difference that “makes a difference to us” is not inherently welcomed in our church culture. That takes real work. It takes knowing who we are and how we came to be that

way. It takes knowing what parts of ourselves we will let go of and what parts of ourselves are non negotiables. It requires us to let go of who we thought we were supposed to be, to become the fullest expression of who we can be together. When we are stretching and changing everywhere else in our lives: in our primary relationships, in our families, at work sometimes the one place we cling the tightest is our churches. Because our churches are our sanctuaries.

At All Souls in Tulsa where I served my longest tenure, we had a crash course in culturally and racially diverse change management in a religious institution and they continue to work hard at it everyday. We were given an opportunity of a lifetime with the instant incorporation of 300 Pentecostal Universalists of whom about 1/3 were African American, which increased the number of people of color in the congregation from 3 to around 103 ...overnight. We knew it was going to be hard work and that our values necessitated it. Our souls craved for our churches to reflect the diversity of the city we served, of the world we live in. The biggest lesson we learned was that we had a lot of work to do.

Before anyone else would feel welcome could feel like our church was their home and not a just waystation or a place to visit, we had to carefully examine: who we were; how we came to be who we were; how we made decisions; what values we held that were foundational and what behaviors were standard but malleable. We had to not just know our story but also know how it came to be our story.

In the Abrahamic faith traditions when Yahweh separates humanity, the story does not end with the tower of Babel. The tower of Babel is actually just one of three stories closely woven together: Babel, Moses & the 10 Commandments, and Pentecost. First, Yahweh separates the people because we are full of prid and trying to BE like God. Then we learned to remain separated by joining with those who *seemed to be like us*, lifting up one or a few traits above the others and fixating on those common traits as the most significant, grouping ourselves by them and resisting those who are not.

And from **our** separation came wars and –isms and oppression. In this country our joining together created systemic oppression and privilege that to this day favors whites over people of color, men over women, cisgender over transgender, straight over lesbian gay or bi, able bodied over the differently abled, US born over immigrant, adults over children or the elderly, native english speakers over non native English speakers, and the wealthy over the poor. Unspoken cultural rules were formed in the fabric of our culture and our institutions about what is right and good and true a hierarchy of worth and value about what we **should** want or **should** aspire to be or do. ***And it's all fabricated.***

In the work I do as a Diversity and Inclusion trainer The place we have to start.. no matter what organization or which individual is to help people understand how they came to be who they are, the ground they were planted in, **before** we can diversify we must first understand how we came to “be”. Both our Unitarian and Universalist roots are grounded in Christianity and I grew up in Oklahoma in the heart of the Bible Belt. I have journeyed from Mystical Diest to Baptist to Pentecostal, to Methodist, to Atheist to a Vipassana meditation firewalking Pagan, to a Unitarian Universalist to Universalist Christian. In my personal experience and the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, in modern psychology.. there is a call to integrate, to bring together, to unify... to not reject

the parts of who we are. We are to include and even welcome all of our story and move from that place toward wholeness.

Back to Genesis Yahweh scattered us it seems out of fear of our potential power. But in Acts 2, something happens. The story takes a turn. Pentecost happened actually on The Jewish Festival Day of Shavuot (which was celebrated long before Jesus arrived on the scene) Shavuot (you may know) is the day commemorating Yahweh giving Moses the law. The Ten Commandments. This was the Birthday of the synagogue...so to speak. Everyone hearing this story in Acts, at that time, would know this. On that day something very strange happens to a group of Jesus' followers. Something happens that Unitarian Universalists for the most part, have dismissed (I am certain Jefferson did not keep this part in.) Pente means 50, so 50 days after Easter - on Pentecost - GOD, evidently, changes her mind.

On Pentecost, we are told, that people from all over Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); People with easy names to pronounce and difficult... the marginalized and the mainstream. They were gathered together in the upper room. So this diverse gaggle of unlikely folks were gathered likely trading goods and there was a meal. Included at the event was a group of Galileans, those who had followed Jesus. **and the wind began to blow.** (Now in biblical language, just in case you are unfamiliar if the wind starts blowing, it means you had better wake up, because something very important is about to happen. The fire under somebody's tush is about to be fanned)

So, the wind begins to blow, and the people see what appear to be tongues of fire that separate and come to rest on each of Jesus' followers. (I like to imagine them coming down directly to their hearts.) The Galileans began to speak and praise. they spoke from their hearts about how incredible it is to be awake and alive. They were sharing their gratitude for their existence and the wonders of life. And their relationship to the Holy. The passers by in the street are said to have heard a cacophony of gibberish. Nothing but noise. But the people **in the room heard their own language** coming from the Galileans. They heard a message that resonated with their experience.

God must have decided that **even in our differences**, when our hearts are touched with the fire of the Spirit humanity **could** and in fact **should** understand one another. When we speak awake and aware from our authentic selves, when we lead with our vulnerability, we will be understood despite our differences. But the real miracle of this story for me, is when **we listen** from that place, from our hearts on fire, when **we listen** not to respond, but with the purpose of connection **to connect** to what matters to them to connect to their experience of the Holy, **Something magical happens**
A common language is formed.

What happened in this room was in fact more beautiful than homogeneity. It was even more beautiful than unity without difference. And the Biblical writers could have said, And it was Good! The miracle of Pentecost: speaking and listening with hearts on fire was in fact the beginning. It was the birthday of what became **the church** of both our

Unitarian and Universalist roots. People with very different experiences, with different cultures, and different understandings were all under the same roof declaring the stories of transformation in their lives, talking about what matters to them **in their own tongues**. And everyone present, and awake... understood.

Now there were some skeptics, mind you. Not everyone was buying into this miracle. Someone in the room (likely a Unitarian seeking an explanation) Exclaimed, "They have had too much wine!" Peter, of course, corrected the skeptic: The wine wasn't even out yet. They were intoxicated by the connection. It's a beautiful space to be in... when someone else's very different metaphor, very different life sheds light on your own. Have you been there?

So Yahweh separates the people in Genesis, and then, by miracle of miracles, there is an opportunity to be together in the same room, speaking **in our own tongues**, about the mystery of life, the wonder of our experience of being human and alive and **we are seen and heard and understood** by those closest to us. We are not critiqued for our word choice, or microscopically examined for the soundness of our argument. We are understood and embraced as well intended loving human beings, as part of a family even in our differences.

What if our churches looked like that?! (like that first gathering of the church in Acts). What if our churches could be a container **that gracious?** a meeting place for **that kind of dialogue?** What if our churches were a gathering place of hearts on fire? A **hearth** from which many hearts could be warmed. What if in our meeting places we could speak from a point of difference about what matters to us and be heard? About the struggles and the joys The difficult decisions of how we come to truth about the mystery of this existence? **You** are the keepers of the flame. How can you tend your own fire such that your ears will hear a fellow traveler? No matter what disguise they may be wearing. No matter what language they speak.

This act, in Acts, has been mimicked and practiced by Pentecostals all over the world as a form of prayer and worship. Those who speak in tongues report that they feel their hearts open up in what they might call a baptism of the Holy Spirit allowing their voices, not confined by their own language, to become a tool of praise. The beauty of the miracle in this story in Acts, is not about speaking gibberish. It is about speaking in your heart language a language that can be understood to those different than you.

You are likely already fluent in a multitude of religious and secular languages Science, Humanism, Philosophy, Atheism, Theism, Buddhism... Learning to speak the language of those with whom we are in relationship benefits us as much as it benefits them. How do we honor our own experience, and the experience of others, with healthy boundaries that honor who we are? How do we keep our heart on fire and open to each other and to change without Disappearing?

First and foremost you must know your own culture. We must listen with our hearts open. extending beyond our own single point of view from the vantage point **of being a member of a people of this FREE faith**. It is a faith where our job is to continue to strive to seek to understand **all** of God's children. How do we keep our hearts on fire open to each other and to change?

First we know who we are. The second way is to come to church. You have amazing opportunities in this church to engage with difference. With this group of amazing open hearted seekers you can explore your own culture practice listening from your heart on fire and speaking in your own tongue. Let Church be a rehearsal for how we want to be in the world.

We are called in this day and age to a new American Pluralism
And our churches are poised to meet the needs of a New American Pluralist church
We cannot stay isolated in any way any longer or we will quickly become irrelevant.
If you are someone who believes religion or even Christianity is at the core of many of our problems in this world... then that is exactly what we should be seeking to influence.

My Psalms project is an effort to do this. When I write contemporary singable Universalist songs from the psalms I am claiming my place in the Christian story in My own Tongue. As a tattooed lesbian minister singing about the love of God I find even in the midst of what can be very polarized psalms. I am claiming my heritage choicefully, by reclaiming it from my heart. We must embrace our roots and be part of the religious dialogue.

What happened that first day on Pentecost is still happening. Our churches hold a sanctuary, where no matter how unique your experience, your struggle, or your journey, if we continue to lead with vulnerability, our stories will be held, we will be understood. And we will manifest our values of inclusion in the world making space for those who cannot make space for themselves.

May we all declare the wonders of God.
May we know and confess the wonders of being human and being alive.
And may we risk speaking in our own tongues!

Tend your hearth
Fan the flames.
Amen.