

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage
FCUCC
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Tongues of Flame

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and faithful unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

The story of Pentecost is one of my favorite because it is about the beginning of the church. Before this point, the disciples and friends of Jesus were still trying to figure out how to share his message and his story. But after this moment of rushing wind, tongues of flame, and the miracle of hearing people speak the Gospel in their own language, about 3,000 people converted to Christianity and dedicated themselves to being disciples of Christ. Thus, the church was born.

One part of this story that I love is the image of tongues of flame dancing through the crowd while people starting speaking in different tongues. It seems that language—what we say and how we say it—is an integral part of Pentecost. And I am struck by the way language works in this story. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, tells us that there were Jews from every nation in Jerusalem that day, so a lot of different countries and languages were represented that day. What interests me is the way the miracle worked. The individuals from all of those different countries didn't suddenly understand the language of the Apostles. Instead, the Apostles suddenly started speaking in multiple languages-- *their* language, using words from *their* homes and their cultures.

This is a tiny detail of the story, but it's very important because it shows us how important diversity seems to be to God. The Holy Spirit could have just made it possible for all of the people there, no matter their language of origin, to just understand and speak in the language of the Apostles. So the Holy Spirit could have made everything and everyone the same, making the followers of Jesus one big homogenous group. But, instead, the Holy Spirit spoke through a diversity of languages and cultural symbols, telling of "God's deeds

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of power.” Speaking their own language, embracing their own customs, the newly converted disciples then were able to return to their own homes and share the stories they heard. The church was then able to spread and grow so quickly because the Apostles didn’t demand homogeneity. It seems like the Holy Spirit values plurality.

There are times in our current world when we feel sad or frustrated that there are so many versions of Christianity, so many different churches, so many different denominations. On top of that, we have multiple faiths and world views in our world, as well. How can we ever get along or agree in the midst of such multiplicity?

This Pentecost moment reminds us to enjoy and embrace this multiplicity. It implies that the Holy Spirit may, in fact, speak in multiple ways through multiple peoples and faiths and that it will still speak the truth. This makes sense to me. God is so vast, so far beyond our understanding, that it’s likely that each one of us, each church, each denomination, each faith, each world view probably understands one small aspect of God’s truth. And so, it turns out that we need our multiple voices all sharing the part that we’re hearing, in order for us all to understand the fuller truth of who God is. That also means that we each have to listen closely to the others, to really think through their understanding of God, to pray over it, consider it, talk with others about it, to look for that kernel of truth, and decide if we should let it stretch or change our own views.

I attended a seminary that we would probably regard as having a more conservative theology than our own and so it tended to attract some more conservative students than myself. It turned out that several of the young men there had been taught that women could not be leaders, and certainly not pastors, in the church. They didn’t know quite what to do with us women students, and some found our presence there so problematic that they left. But others stuck it out, listening to us in class, and forming friendships with us. In class, they would quote scripture and argue with the professors that women

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were prohibited from becoming pastors. I still remember clearly the first time I ever preached was for my preaching class there. After the sermon, one of those young men came up to me and said, “you are clearly called by God to be a pastor. I just want you to know that.” I have heard a similar story from several women who have attended that seminary over the years.

Those young men had a courage and flexibility of faith to stay open to the voice of the Holy Spirit, allowing it to slightly alter their understanding of God, women’s roles, and the church. Their new knowledge didn’t break their faith, though sometimes it did cause a crisis of sorts. Instead, it helped them grow. Likewise, I can say that my own faith grew and changed because of the ecumenical nature of that place. Although I disagreed with those men about some very key issues of faith, I learned from them the incredible power and beauty of prayer. Did you know that before attending seminary, I had never prayed out loud in my life—other than the written prayers we all said together in my church? I had no idea how to do it, nor did I fully understand why it was necessary. Why couldn’t I just pray quietly in my head and why would we need to pray out loud for each other? It just hadn’t been a part of my church tradition. But we started every class, every meal, every group discussion with prayer. When someone had a bad day, we prayed for them. When someone was traveling, we prayed. When someone had a good day, we prayed. We prayed to praise God, to thank God, to offer joy and sorrow. Every time we felt the spirit moving in our heart, we prayed. I hadn’t understood until that time how the Holy Spirit could move among people praying out loud—how the Holy Spirit can guide prayer so that the speaker is able to pray for what is needed, and so that the hearer can hear what needs to be heard. And I was amazed and blessed by the power of those prayers to affect me and everyone else, touched as we were by the love of the Spirit. What a gift! What a new way of understanding God and how we communicate God’s love with one another! Where would I be now, if I hadn’t learned that wonderful aspect of faith and of connecting with God from those people I regarded as “other” at seminary?

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The Holy Spirit has placed tongues of flame upon us all, calling us to speak our understanding of truth so that others might understand God better. But God has also given us patience, curiosity, and love for God and one another so that we can look and listen for the tongues of flame given to others, so that our understanding of God's truth can also grow. So let us listen and look for that flame as it burns and dances among us all. Thanks be to God.