

Pentecost: Finding Yourself on Holy Ground

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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.

Acts 2:1-4

Most congregations' celebration of Pentecost is confined to a single Sunday each year. And while it is important to mark that day to celebrate the birth of the church, I have come to believe that its lessons should echo out throughout our lives. Pentecost, after all, is a potent reminder that God speaks in a multiplicity of voices. We would do well to live and serve as though it does.

What I want to set out before you in this piece are a couple of things. First, I want to share my own experience in ministry, within both traditional and non-traditional contexts, and how that experience has shaped the way I see the art of preaching as a Pentecostal exercise. Second, I want to share some practical suggestions and ideas that might be adaptable to different ministry contexts. And third, I want to leave you with some reflection questions to ponder, ways that the Pentecostal moment might stretch your own preaching and proclamation.

My longest ministry tenure to date was serving as solo pastor of a Presbyterian congregation here in Atlanta. During those beautiful and challenging eleven years, I was keen to share the pulpit with others. We welcomed seminary students, professors, mission agency staff, traveling mission personnel, and more. Even with this approach, though, the truth was that I alone was the preacher at least three Sundays out of every month. Though I remain a work in progress, it was still my vision of God that became the dominant voice in our congregation's life.

There were experiments along the way. We had a few "dialogue" sermons here and there. They were generally well-received, though it was clear that this would be a periodic experience and not a "new normal." After all, preaching was part of my job description.

The one place where we leaned into a multiplicity of voices was in the Scripture readings. It began when we switched over to the relatively new Narrative Lectionary, whose approach meant that we would use a single reading that was much, much longer than what we were accustomed to doing. A single voice would lose the congregation's attention before the text was finished. But if there were two, three, or even four readers, that was a recipe for success. So while I could claim there was theology

at work behind this artistic choice, it was a decision borne out of necessity—but one that worked well.

Perhaps you can imagine this process working well for narrative readings: one voice reading as the “narrator,” another, as Jesus, yet another as the “crowds,” and so on. The process worked well, though, for all readings. It allowed us to break up some of Paul’s run-on sentences or to create an antiphonal approach with different phrases read by different voices. It also allowed us to play with the types of readers: a woman’s voice for God, the preacher’s voice for the Pharisees, phrases to be read in unison, and more.

My favorite day for this approach to Scripture readings was Pentecost. Not only would we employ several readers, we would also dip our toes into a multi-lingual celebration. At first glance, we should not have been able to pull this off—after all, we looked like most Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations of our size: mostly older, mostly white, mostly monolingual Americans. But when you barely scratched the surface, you discovered far more than meets the eye: immigrants and their children, bilingual ESL teachers, and many more—all willing to stretch the expectations of what the “word of the Lord” sounds like.

Take Acts 2:6, using just a few available languages within our congregation, by way of example:

Liturgist 1 (in English): And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each ...

Liturgist 2 (in Spanish): ... in the native language of each ...

Liturgist 3 (in Georgian): ... in the native language of each ...

Liturgist 4 (in Mandarin): ... in the native language of each ...

All Liturgists (in English): ... in the native language of each!

Pentecost Sundays also presented an opportunity to play with language in other parts of the liturgy, such as the passing of the peace. We would print bulletins with the phrase “The peace of Christ be with you” translated into a number of languages (along with English pronunciation guides). Worshipers were invited to share their particular translation as they greeted others. On some days, the Peace could be the longest part of our liturgy!

I look back fondly on my years as a solo pastor, and I am deeply grateful for that congregation’s willing and playful Spirit. I also wish we had let Pentecost roll over us so that we might expand our Godly vocabulary.

Prior to landing in Atlanta, my wife, Elizabeth, and I had spent three plus years serving as mission personnel in a Palestinian village in the northern West Bank. Living in the midst of conflict and under Occupation, we saw brutal suffering and unexplainable hope through it all. In short, we experienced the gospel through the lives and witness of our Palestinian siblings in Christ. They trace their spiritual roots back to Pentecost itself, with Arabs among those identified in the great crowd of those

who heard Peter preach. They see Christ not only as Lord, but also as a compatriot of their lands. The Scripture comes alive among Palestinian olive trees in ways that it cannot amid Georgia pines.

We were also able to travel throughout the region in our time there. In each place we visited, we met the church. We worshiped with Syrians who still pray in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. We attended Coptic Orthodox liturgy in Egypt, following the custom of removing our shoes because we found ourselves on holy ground. We sang multilingual hymns with Presbyterians in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. We visited the holy sites in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine; and we met the “living stones,” the local Christian community, each and every time. It was, in short, an education in learning just a few of the multitude of ways that God is expressed, loved, and served around the world.

In recent years, I have shifted to decidedly non-traditional ministry. For the last seven years, I have focused on building a community centered around art, faith, and justice. The centerpiece of this community has been a weekly podcast, *aicast*. This conversational format is one that I have grown to love and cherish. I have met an incredible variety of artists from a remarkable breadth of artistic expressions. We have discussed their art itself, what inspires that art, and how that art seeks to make the world a better place.

The unique gift of this ministry has been the opportunity to cross paths with a much wider range of God’s beloved humanity than any other ministry of which I’ve been a part. This has come alongside the ways cultural conversations have made me aware of my particular identity as a straight white dude and the overwhelming—and often, invisible—privilege and access those traits grant me regularly. I have met Black playwrights, Queer musicians, Latinx filmmakers, Trans visual artists, and so much more. And each time, my understanding of God, the world, and my relationship with Jesus ends up being stretched, changed, and transformed.

This work has also helped me understand the role that art can play in faith formation—both within the confines of the sanctuary and far beyond it. And to me, it continues to be an extension of that early Pentecost. First, as with all “signs and wonders,” there is a kind of performance art at work in the gift of tongues. Second, the miracle that allows the crowd to communicate across language barriers resonates with John Calvin’s notion of accommodation—that God’s divine wisdom is so thoroughly unknowable that God consistently finds ways to bridge the gap with human understanding. And third, art—as a creative enterprise—echoes the divine imprint within us, giving us a multitude of ways to express the inexpressible. The Eastern Orthodox have a lovely way of putting this when it comes to iconography: in Christ, God blessed the material; so we use the material to bless God.

Another wild piece of this non-traditional ministry work has been my experience with the world of improvisation—and especially, that of improv comedy. Like many, I first came to know of this practice through its popular versions—such as the

television program *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* But the more I went down the improv rabbit hole, and the more I learned its foundational principles, the more I saw the intersection of it with the work of ministry leadership. I bring this up in an article about preaching not because I think it wise to discard a manuscript in favor of an audience suggestion, but rather because of the way these practices have caused me to radically change the way I approach communication.

This improv work has led to a number of invitations to speak at forums on the topic of adaptive theological leadership. But rather than being the expected “sage on a stage,” I relish the opportunity to move the group immediately into playing simple improv exercises, which then moves into reflection on those activities. And what I have discovered, each and every time, is that the theological wisdom that comes out of the group is far wiser than anything I had planned to share. In truth, it is the work of the Spirit in the gathered crowd, lifting up both the possibilities and challenges of ministry.

I have also come to believe that the act of preaching is, itself, an art. And so, when I do get the opportunity to preach these days, I take all of the above experiences into account. One thing that has become a regular part of my preaching practice is that I make sure I no longer do it alone. The dialogue sermon is no longer just a gimmick for me, or a periodic experiment. It has become, for me, the most faithful way to proclaim the gospel. And so, I do it in conversation with others who have been called to preach. I intentionally seek out folks whose identities are different from mine. This has included, among others, sermon and communion in a Presbyterian congregation alongside a female CME elder; a Zoom conversation with a Palestinian scholar of queer liberation movements in the Arab world; and being one of four Easter preachers—whose identities included gender, sexuality, and racial diversity—in a Baptist congregation.

In these experiences, my conversation partners and I find ways to proclaim the gospel, even—and especially—when we might disagree on how we understand the text with which we wrestle. In fact, those moments of theological tension have become my favorite part of the sermon. They sit as yet more Pentecostal reminders that there is this beautiful diversity of voices through which not only is God praised, but through which God speaks to us.

Below, I want to offer some reflection questions for you to consider in your own Pentecostal preaching practice:

1. What are some of the overlooked gifts in your ministry context that could be brought into the work of proclamation? Are some identities—racial, age, gender, physical ability, etc.—prioritized over others?
2. Are there places in worship where more than one language can be spoken/shared with authenticity? How could you do that while making sure that worship is accessible? Or would doing so increase accessibility?

3. How would your ministry context respond to a widened approach to proclamation—whether that’s in the form of a dialogue sermon, a sermon “talk back,” a prompt to which the congregation is invited to respond, or other approaches?
4. How can various art forms expand the work of proclamation in your context? Who are the artists in your community who would relish the opportunity to be part of a broadened conversation?

The world of the church is a grand, beautiful, diverse one. We see this so clearly in the Pentecost miracle, which birthed the church into existence. Our ministries, including our preaching, should strive to reflect this beauty in every way that we can.