

It's Five o'clock Somewhere

Acts 2:1-14

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In 2009, after a week and a half spent hopping from hostel to hostel in Germany and Austria, I landed in the lovely Baltic town of Warnemünde. By some odd fortune, I found myself staying at the home of the town's beloved former mayor, a fortress on the coast that, with the exception of the jacuzzi-hunt room, was decorated entirely in shades of vanilla. I arrived at the house after ten days in cramped hostels and six hours on a train. You could read every minute of the journey on my face, the ragged American in sore need of a shower in a laughably luxurious home. Just after my grand entry, as if to offer a study in contrasts, the most beautiful gaggle of German 20-somethings shuffled into the sitting room. They had been surfing, of course, and they appeared to have hopped right off of the cover of *Deutschland Sports Illustrated*. The whole scene left me speechless, which was helpful considering my German consisted of ordering "Ein bier...bitte."

Dinner, which began promptly at 9 o'clock P.M., lasted three hours. Bless the sweet, beautiful Germans, they tried to remember that I couldn't keep up, but somehow every conversation that began in English ended in German. I was utterly lost, which is how, for the first time since I was born, I found myself sitting through a meal *quietly*.

Perhaps I was born to be a preacher; God knows I have been a talker since my very first word. Silence is banished in my presence. The child of two teachers, I have been the bane of many a teacher's existence, and I've seen more than my share of earplugs on any given road trip. I love to talk. So you'll understand why, the day after my silent three-hour, five-course German dinner, I was in the mood to excise my vocal cords.

Our hosts left instructions that we take the train to Rostock, a town over, for dinner. Where better to talk, to observe, to pontificate, than a train? There were not many people in the station, and I was on fire—offering observation after observation about the grand German culture, its complicated legacy, and my hopes to visit a nearby biergarten. Nothing that I saw or thought or heard or smelled was beyond the range of my commentary. I was entertained beyond measure and grateful for my stage.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a shabbily dressed young man edging toward us. He moved closer and closer in as I babbled on, clearly interested in the two women on the train platform. Suddenly Colleen, my housemate back in the States with whom I was traveling, stepped on my toe and told me, in no uncertain terms, to *halt die Klappe*. Shut. Up. I assumed she, like so many others, had simply forgotten her earplugs. I proceeded.

Colleen had spent a year in the area and knew it well. She knew in particular that Rostock had been a Nazi and, more recently, Neo-Nazi stronghold, and that well into the 2000s there were pockets of deep anti-foreign sentiment in the otherwise idyllic town. The man continued his approach. He was just out of ear-shot but clearly straining to hear something in my commentary. Colleen surveyed him as I prattled on. She asked—demanded—once more that I stop talking. Had I paused I may have

read the panic on her face. I did not. Unbeknownst to me, she had, from a pin on the man's lapel and a tattoo blazoned on his arm, deduced that he was was a member of a particularly brutal anti-foreign neo-Nazi gang. While I pontificated, she panicked.

When our train finally arrived at the station, she pushed me through the doors. He followed on our heels. She leaned in and quietly explained what she saw—the symbols on his jacket suggested a willingness to embrace violence, his pin signaled allegiance to the neo-Nazi clan. With each word I spoke, she warned, I betrayed us. In the heart of Germany, two young Americans—a politically fraught identity in that particular historical moment—were vulnerable and exposed. By the logic of the young man, we weren't supposed to be there. We were foreigners, and we didn't belong. In an otherwise empty train-car, he sat right behind us—ear turned to us, hands hidden. For the remainder of the half-hour trip, I sat in terrified silence. I feared the worst: that if I spoke, if he heard my voice again, confirmed that I wasn't German, well, who knows what might happen.

We presume to know a lot about one another based on the way we talk—socioeconomic status, class, gender, education, nationality—name your signifier. Each indicator, according to our calculus, has its tells, and each category, whether it be nationality, race, sexuality, or gender, its intrinsic truths. Within five minutes of moving to New Jersey for graduate school, I'd swallowed every vowel in oil and not much longer made po-em a multi-syllabic word. I didn't have to announce that I was a Southerner; my drawl gave me away. And if I was a Southerner, my classmates presumed I was probably a little slow—and definitely a farmer who was also a debutante and likely carrying a gun.

It's funny, or it could be, until you're on a train thousands of miles from home, or being attacked for not "talking right," or facing a mob of folks who are most assuredly the "us" to your "them."

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Pentecost for the disciples began as the dullest gathering in all of Jerusalem. They were there for a holy harvest celebration, but they'd hidden themselves away from the fracas, retreated from the thousands of pilgrims gathered outside of their doors. Luke recounts a sombre mood; the waiting disciples brood, forgetting perhaps that they have just seen the twin miracles of resurrection and ascension; they are glued to their chairs in an upper room. Jesus' remaining disciples seem to feel the same way my grandmother did about gatherings in a post-resurrection world. If they're associated with Jesus and worth their salt, they should be quiet, demure, and orderly. No hubbub, no scenes, just prayerful reflection until it's time for lunch.

But then, as it will do, the Spirit shows up and things go sideways.

Imagine yourself in those chairs. Imagine the sheer silence suddenly interrupted. Allow yourself to hear the rattling sound fill the house, bellowing as if from the heart of creation, like a bass drop from the divine throne. Feel the wind whip about the room, and if that doesn't get your attention, turn your eye to the tongues of fire. Fire headed straight for you, resting on you, and then, as if your will is no longer your own, propelling you, doing something in you, burning your tongue, your insides, making you want to talk.

It's a miracle in its own right: orderly and proper Greek-speaking Galileans, probably Proto-Presbyterians, with their particularities, biases, and preferences, thrust from their stiflingly dull room only to find themselves among a throng of pilgrims from all

over God's creation. Orderly and proper Greek-speaking Galileans speaking with and being understood by more foreigners, more "thems," than they even knew existed. One moment there was silence, and then there was a tent meeting; one moment there were 12 disciples, the next an international congregation. One moment there was an "us," the next there was a people. In the space of an instant, innumerable divisions were toppled. Parthians, Elamites, and Mesopotamians were able to hear the good news in their own tongues: "Jesus is risen indeed."

Turns out that when the Spirit shows up, the disciples and all Jerusalem's pilgrims with them are transformed from a collection of dull, disparate individuals into a *people* drawn by a common purpose—proclaiming the Word and hearing it. "You shall be my witnesses," Jesus said before leaving them. And now, like it or not, they were. Onlookers buzzed with amazement. But some, the orderly type, probably another set of proto-Presbyterians, sneered: "They're drunk, and it's not even time for Sunday brunch!"

It turns out that it doesn't much matter what language you speak or how much money you have or any other signifier. When the Spirit shows up, God's gonna set you on fire!

The problem with Pentecost is that it's 10:30 in the morning, and it looks a lot like last call at the Thirsty Monk. Established rules and boundaries are set on their side. The problem with Pentecost is that it makes folks like me, folks who take pleasure in order and decorum and little boxes, rather uncomfortable. But I'll tell you what, when it comes to the Spirit, it's always five o'clock somewhere.

When I read this text, I can't help but wonder where, exactly, the Spirit might show up today. If indeed we were to find ourselves in the thrall of another Pentecost, where might we hear the sound of the heavenly bass drop? Are the rooms we good Presbyterians occupy as stiflingly dull as those occupied by the disciples that day? After all, we tend to segregate ourselves much like those early disciples did. Like with like. Even though we understand them to be flawed and divisive, our boundaries—those signifiers culturally understood that divide rich and poor, white and black, gay and straight—are all too present in our tidy lives. We line ourselves up where we think we belong or where we wish we would. But perhaps if the Spirit came blazing down Augusta St. at just the right time, she might catch all God's people—not just this good congregation, but the folks gathered in the Harris Teeter Tavern or down at the Pita House. Not just "us," but them too, our Mexican neighbors waiting for day labor outside the Home Depot, the unhoused folks we see walking up and down August St. each day, the Palestinian businessmen, the trans student, the rich doctor, and the Black folks on Main St. reminding us that their lives matter too. And then perhaps, bound by a common flame, we who so cherish our tidiness could finally break out of our upper rooms and embrace God's Kingdom and our siblings.

Now don't be mistaken. The scene may look a little wonky, but that's the Spirit—the one who makes possible all impossibilities, who hovered over the chaotic void at creation, who called young Mary to embrace the eternal God in her womb, who descended at Jesus' baptism, who bonded the crucified Son with the suffering Father. That same Spirit at Pentecost created a people and brought forth a community where before there was only division.

And remember this, because it's important: the Spirit did not erase the differences between those folks in Jerusalem; the Spirit did not create one supreme culture or

language or race or gender, one way of being properly “Christian.” In the movement of the Spirit at Pentecost, the very thing that previously prohibited community—the inability of one person to speak to another—was overcome. Each heard in their own tongue, each spoke in their own voice. The difference is recognized, but it is not entrenched. Behold a thousand punchdrunk pilgrims retaining their individuality while relating to the singular voice of a summoning God, “You shall be my witnesses.”

I’ll say it again: when it comes to the Spirit, it’s always five o’clock somewhere.

I love to fill a silence. But on that train in Rostock, unable to speak, I felt—even if the most minute of ways—the pain of being suspect simply because of the way I spoke and what my speaking signified. That glimpse of fear was only a taste of what so many in our own culture, our own community, have experienced. I was undoubtedly protected by my privilege even as I was momentarily threatened because of my difference. In those tense minutes, I recalled all the shameful ways I had dismissed difference, the superiority I presumed, the walls I built up when someone didn’t meet my expectations or speak my language.

The church has too often served as stern gatekeepers of societal prejudice rather than joyful co-workers in God’s good creation. The good news? This Sunday, as we celebrate Pentecost, we have a chance to redeem that. We have a chance to embrace the divine spark in each of us, to watch its manifestation, to celebrate with those whom God has given ears to hear.

No longer can we bide our time creating and curating division, marking who’s in and who’s out. Pentecost calls us to joyfully embrace the wide world and all its voices—always with an eye toward the singular miracle that we, each of us, are together children of the Creator, given life by the Spirit, brought reconciliation by the Son. Salvation is never just mine or yours. It is always ours. Always open and moving outward. Propelling us, pushing us. Claiming in our fellowship little children who haven’t said their first word and the least of these who we wish would stop talking.

By the power of the Spirit, the walls we have built to protect ourselves from one another, the sinful rattle of our entrenched differences, and the cacophony of chaos we have created can be transformed to a unified harmony of praise. Men and women, young and old, Carolina Gamecocks and the orange team Upstate and even Georgia Bulldogs, regardless of race, class, sexuality, or nationality can be pushed and prodded and sanctified by the Spirit. We can be made one. But only when we get over our tidy pretensions, our suspicions and mistrust. Only when we open ourselves to the faithful growing pains of a life of discipleship. Only when we leave our hallowed halls to embrace the voices we might otherwise never have heard.

At Pentecost the Spirit rests on us in order that we might be made a little restless. The fire nipping at our heels compels us toward a loud, discordant world. But we go having heard God’s Word, God’s mighty “YES,” even in the midst of our own alienation and sinfulness. We go trusting that the yes we carry forward will always be understood. God will make it so.

Things might look a little shook up, the crowd might be rowdier than at your usual haunt, but there’s work to be done, and who but we motley disciples will do it. After all, when it comes to the Spirit, it’s always five o’clock somewhere.