

Pause

Every year, we read and hear this text. And every year I am struck by how loud it is. The spirit's blowing in is described as the "howling of a fierce wind," and then there is the talking...so much talking. All at once. A loud and confusing cacophony of sounds, in the midst of an already bustling Jerusalem. Because, as you may know, the celebration of Pentecost does not start on that morning. Pentecost is already a Jewish celebration, a harvest festival that celebrates the giving of the Law, when Moses received the gift of God's word to and God's covenant with the Hebrews on Mt. Sinai. Pilgrims from all over the region would make their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate, so the city is already filled with people and sounds from all over.

I would like to try a quick experiment. On the count of three, I want you to say your full name and your birthday in your normal speaking voice. One. Two. Three. [names and birthdays] Now, can you tell me the full name of someone on the other side of the sanctuary? Or the birthday of someone in the pew behind you? Too much noise? Too far away? Yes. All of the above. And more maybe. Maybe we couldn't hear those things because we were thinking so much about speaking on cue—or remembering our own birthday. Maybe it was simply too much. Too many words. Too loud. More than our brains could even begin to process, because there wasn't a chance to listen.

On that Pentecost morning, something is different. Those gathered in Jerusalem can hear the apostles and can understand what they are saying, can understand the good news the disciples are proclaiming. Yes, the Holy Spirit is at work in the speaking, but the Spirit is at work in the hearing, in the listening, too.

A sweet video went viral a few years ago and popped up again in a commercial a few weeks ago. A father sits on the sofa with his toddler son. They're watching something on TV and having an animated conversation. The 19-month-old is speaking gibberish—as far as we can tell—but his dad takes him seriously and responds to the child's words and reactions. The video is adorable—as are the father and son—and it also gives a textbook example of how parents and other caregivers help children learn to have a conversation, how to

be in conversation with someone else. One writer points out that the dad does one thing that is especially helpful:

Whether the dad in the video knows it or not, he's helping his baby understand that communication is a two-way street. In particular, he is using a technique commonly used by speech and language pathologists — the three-second pause. The dad isn't just engaging in a monologue. After he responds to his baby, he waits. That pause allows for his kid to respond. This allows the kid to practice the cadence of conversation that will ultimately build a strong foundation for future communication.¹

The pause. For all of the adorable gestures and laughter, the key is the pause. The dad responds and then he waits, and in that waiting, the child begins to understand how conversation works, how relationships and understanding are built. The dad does not speak baby talk or make fun of the child's apparent gibberish. He doesn't write him off as just a baby. He doesn't discount the child's speech as just noise. Nor does he jump in and speak for his son. He trusts his son with the pause and listens [and shows genuine] "interest in what his child is saying."²

There is a lot of noise out there these days. Like restaurants with the background music turned up too high, it seems that each day the voices get louder and louder shouting for their belief or their opinion to get heard. And I'm afraid that too often the church plays along. On occasion, we are so desperate to get our voice heard over the din of the larger world's noise that we forget to listen, let alone pause.

The skeptics in the crowd on that Pentecost are quick to write off the apostles. They cannot imagine that these rough-around-the-edges interlopers have anything worth hearing. They snort and shrug and decide that these hayseeds with their funny Galilean accents must be three sheets to the wind, drunk on cheap wine, as if being suddenly fluent in an unfamiliar language is a typical result of being intoxicated. While a few welcome the gift of hearing these disciples' "[declaring] the mighty works of God," others are quick to rebuff it. Even when they are offered the very best news, there are some who choose to ignore the message because of who the messenger is.

¹ Patrick A. Coleman, <https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/viral-video-dad-talking-to-baby-good-parenting/>

² Coleman

And then, perhaps because he can read their minds or at least the expressions on the crowd's faces, Peter begins to preach: [Read Acts 2:14-21]

Peter is quick to insist that those proclaiming are not tipsy, but that they are a living breathing speaking example of God's Spirit speaking and working through ordinary folk, the really ordinary ones whom you wouldn't expect to have anything profound to say. Old ones dream dreams when no one believes they are able to see anything except the past. Young ones see visions; children prophesy, speaking God's call for justice and mercy here and now. These are not the voices the people tend to listen to; these are not the preachers they are inclined to hear. What about us? To whom are we inclined to listen? Or perhaps more pointedly, for whom am I willing to pause?

One of our denomination's affirmations of faith from our *Book of Confessions* declares that we "hear the voices of those long silenced."³ I'm pretty sure those voices were never truly silent. My suspicion is that those of us with the floor and the mic were—and maybe are—just simply really good at holding these others at more than arm's length and tuning them out as I fill the pauses with my own answers or maybe even my own excuses. These voices have been trying to tell me for years that the environment is in danger, that too many brown and black children struggle to get a decent education, that pulling oneself up by her bootstraps is impossible if she has no boots to begin with, that too many who live in forgotten coal towns and abandoned inner cities do not have clean water to drink or clean air to breathe. But I have been too slow to listen and too quick to fill the pauses with the answers I'd rather hear.

And I wonder what I've been missing, what the church is missing when we blow through the pauses, when I rush to fill the silence with my words. What might God want me to hear in the voices of the ones who do not vote like me, the ones who are too often forgotten or undervalued or ignored? "I will pour out my Spirit on all people," God says. All people. Could God really mean the ones I shout down on the TV and argue with in my head? The ones I respond to by plugging my ears? The ones I pretend not to hear? Yes. Even those Galileans who are more exuberant about Jesus than is socially acceptable, especially before I've had my morning coffee.

³ PCUSA *Brief Statement of Faith*

I have good reasons to tune them out—or so I tell myself: their words make me uncomfortable; their words lead me to question if I’m really being faithful; they push me to examine how I understand the God I’ve tried to worship and follow my whole life. I tell myself that these voices aren’t all that well-educated, or winsome, or witty, and quite often they are hard for me to understand; they don’t look at things the way I do. Exactly, and—if I can trust and honor the pause and listen, these voices might just remind me how creative our God truly is, that the world is in fact being transformed even now, that there is untold joy to be found in listening to new voices, and that salvation has come for me and for all in the person of Jesus Christ, the most unlikely of Saviors.

My hope this Pentecost is that we will pay attention to the sacred wind that keeps blowing in and keeps filling us anew. And that we will answer the call to listen, to pause. Because if we can find a way to pause, we might just catch God’s holy breath and discover what God is up to now and next. If we can find a way to pause, to listen fully when we are tempted to speak, we will hear that holy word that tells us in no uncertain terms, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” even now, even us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.