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Drumsticks for Everyone!

Acts 2:1-18 NRSV "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 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. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

The discussion in the class at seminary had been spirited, even heated at times.

The topic was how Christians ought to live and how they ought to seek to structure society so as to more fully reflect the Kingdom of God. One man – passionate, eloquent, idealistic – was arguing that Christians should do absolutely everything they could to make the principles of utter fairness and equality and equity totally structure society. He also said that such a vision was not a pipe-dream, but was in fact truly

achievable on this earth. The class's professor, a man by the name of Langdon Gilkey, a theological giant who had enormous influence on three generations of pastors and scholars and a man to whom I owe a great deal of my own thinking, had let the discussion run. But now he was ready to respond to his idealistic student's remarks. Professor Gilkey cleared his throat and said "Let me respond to you." Everyone in the class looked at him attentively, pens poised to catch his words which would no doubt be learned and scholarly. Professor Gilkey then said this: *"anyone who has ever tried to serve a fried chicken dinner to his or her family knows that it is impossible to completely structure any society on the basis of perfect fairness, equity, and equality."* Why? *"Because,"* he said, citing a deep theological principle, *"a chicken just doesn't have enough legs."*¹

I don't know about you, but that remark certainly hits home with the experience in our family: when they were small, one of our children once seriously suggested that we weigh each piece of chocolate cake to make sure the portions were absolutely equal -- but the other children said they wouldn't trust the process unless they *each* had their own scales to do the weighing. And then there was that long car trip one summer, in which one of them (sitting on the left side of the car) complained about his brother (sitting on the right side of the car): *"Mom! He's looking out my window!"* Many parental memories were brought back by a Facebook post I saw this week that said "Hell hath no fury like a toddler whose sibling pushed the elevator button first." How about you: Do any of these describe your life on occasion? I'll bet they do. In fact, let's come

¹Adapted from my experience in a class taught by Professor Gilkey at the University of Chicago Divinity School, 1977.

clean: hasn't each one of us had that experience of keeping score when faced with the small inequalities and unfairnesses of our lives? For just as our children when they were young would know which sibling got to stay up three minutes past bedtime on an occasion seven months earlier, I suspect in most couples and most friendships there is a little bit of silent score-keeping that also goes on. Not the prettiest of pictures, is it? And yet, you know what? These kinds of responses, while indeed not very pretty, are very understandable. Because it is undeniably true that equality, fairness, the sense of being given what you deserve, are difficult to come by sometimes. Professor Gilkey was right: many times in life, there just don't seem to be enough drumsticks to go around, and somebody therefore gets left with the wings or the back.

But it's at exactly that point that the Pentecost story is so fascinating. The story tells us that every single one of those in attendance that day were filled equally with the Spirit of God. And there were no complaints. No one got out their scales and compared the spiritual portions. Nobody said "*He got more than I did.*" On the contrary: The Spirit of God was spread around abundantly, extravagantly; there were all the drumsticks that anyone could want; everybody had an elevator button to push. And everyone, says Peter, everyone is given the power and permission to dream God's dream, to share in God's vision. No one kept score. Nobody was disappointed. There were indeed drumsticks for everyone.

What does this mean for us? First, the greatest Pentecost miracle in this story is not the "mighty wind" or the "tongues of fire." No, the supreme miracle in this story is one that most easily gets overlooked -- it was not that they were speaking in tongues that was so strange and astonishing, but that they were all understood. After all, there

is a sense in which you and I speak in tongues all the time: I'm sure that if Norman Heimer tried to talk chemistry with me it would sound like a foreign tongue in my ears. If you've ever read your insurance policy, you may have the experience that it's more like writing in tongues, almost but not quite English. My cell phone bill seems to be written in tongues. Yet on the day of Pentecost all those present were **not** hearing tongues they couldn't understand; they were not hearing gibberish or nonsense from one another, but words which were clear and which made sense. They could all understand one another. And that's the real miracle here.² It may have been a Babel of voices, but it was heard with one understanding ear.

And that, I think, is the very same miracle which you and I yearn for sometimes too -- especially when life is handing us too few drumsticks, and when we believe ourselves to be absolutely misunderstood. How many parents have had their moments of listening to the words that come out of the mouths of their children and simply cannot understand how these small people could possibly be related to them? How many husbands or wives have those moments in which they feel that the person next to them simply is unable to understand, unable to feel what they're feeling, unable to appreciate things from their perspective? How many of us have sometimes yearned for a friend who know us so well that he or she understood us without our saying a word? Indeed, we all yearn deeply for understanding and for being understood, but too often we seem to have to settle instead for being only partly understood, or we settle for trying to understand -- and know that we aren't succeeding very well. And that can be draining,

²From Edmund Steimle, God the Stranger (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 41. I am indebted to Steimle for the approach in the first part of this sermon.

no?. It can sap your energy. It can diminish your zest for life.

But let's try it from the other direction: I invite you to recall a moment in your life in which you **did** feel that somebody indeed understood you. Not just that you were tolerated, or left alone, or put up with, or accommodated, but a moment, a time, in which you truly and really felt **understood**. What was that like? I suspect it was transforming, energizing, wasn't it? Such moments in which we truly understand or are understood are moments in which the limits are overcome and a connection is made. For that is, in part, is exactly what it means to say that life is meaningful -- it is to say that I am connected to something larger than myself. Those moments when life is full of meaning are those moments when I know deep down that I am part of something important, that I am connected to something larger than myself, something valuable in the very connection. It is a moment of understanding, of meaning, in which I know that I matter.

It must have been the same for that small band led by Peter those 50 days after Easter. For they have been waiting and wondering after the death of Jesus. It is not hard to imagine their fear and worry, their loneliness and their questions about the meaning of it all, their sense of shame for abandoning Jesus in his time of need, their astonishment at what his ascension meant, their feeling of not understanding and not being connected to something really important. Even the way that Luke tells the story suggests in fact how very disconnected things were, how lacking in understanding and being understood they were. Luke very carefully names the countries represented there in Jerusalem -- Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Parthia, Rome, and more. And yet, this very way of listing suggests not unity or understanding, but disconnectedness -- for,

after all, what do Mesopotamians have to say to Cappadocians? How in the world could Parthians possibly understand Romans? How do gay and straight, rich and poor, Republican and Democrat, know how to speak to each other? Don't these very labels serve to divide, serve to show not the *connectedness* of things, but the *division*?

But the scripture says that all of a sudden the bearers of all these labels and walls and colors and races and nationalities that had divided were changed and transfigured. How? Luke explains it oh-so-simply: *they could understand, and they were understood*. The sense of fear and resignation, the worry that had gripped them, the sense of limitedness, the brooding over the pages now turned and gone was all swept away in that moment. For in that moment *they could understand, and they were understood*. And so in that moment life was full of meaning, they were made aware of their connection with one another and with God in a way that showed them that the limits and the walls and the barriers that humans too often erect between themselves were not ultimate, were not the last word on things.

And what happens next? Peter and the disciples found new energy in that experience of understanding. And how does Peter put words to it? Through the powerful words of the prophet Joel who said that "in the day of the Lord," in the day of understanding, all humankind -- male and female, young and old, Parthian and Roman, Jew and Samaritan, one and all -- all are connected together by the Spirit of God and are called to dream and to "prophesy." And in the Biblical tradition "prophesying" is not fortune-telling; no, it means to see things in new ways, to connect things up in new ways, to dream and work for what could be. Not the kind of dream that takes us out of reality, not the kind of dream that lets us escape the world, but the kind of dream that

transforms reality, the kind of dreams that connect us all to one another and that are indeed more important than those things that try to divide us.

And so the Pentecost miracle is really about **two** things: the first is that experience of understanding and being understood – about the lines between folks falling down – and the **second** is about the possibility of creating a new future. For while Professor Gilkey may have been right about fried chicken dinners, might the Holy Spirit be calling you to dream of and work for a day when no child or adult knows the pangs of hunger and when twenty-percent of Americans do not live in poverty? And while elevators will still have too few buttons for squabbling siblings, might the Holy Spirit be calling you to dream of and work for a day when no child will ever again be shot with a handgun just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time as one was just this week, shot while nursing at his mother’s breast?³ And while men and women may still engage in score-keeping over small things, might the Holy Spirit be calling you to dream of and work for a day when women are truly paid equally with men, and the one-in-five women who will experience sexual assault in their lifetimes⁴ will become none? Might the Holy Spirit be calling you to dream of and work for a day when the ninety-one percent of unchurched 15-through-30-year-olds in our society who think that the words “church” and “Christian” mean “anti-gay”⁵ will come to know that actually those words mean “unconditional love”?

³<http://www.11alive.com/mb/news/local/decaturn/infant-shot-while-in-its-moms-arms/185267237>

⁴<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/health/nearly-1-in-5-women-in-us-survey-report-sexual-assault.html>

⁵http://www.salon.com/2012/05/17/christianitys_anti_gay_stance_backfires/

Yes, we live in a world that is imperfect and is far from the Kingdom. But Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit, started on Pentecost and continuing to this very hour, calls each one of us to dream and “prophesy” and work for a world that is more full of love, more blessed with understanding, less divided by things that don’t matter to God; a world where each and every person is loved, safe, and cherished. That day is not yet here. But the Holy Spirit calls us to dream it and work for it in ways large or small. The 19th century minister and author, Edward Everett Hale said, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”⁶ What can you dream? What can you do?

⁶https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edward_Everett_Hale