

Signing the Spirit

Day of Pentecost, Year B, Acts 2:1-21

May 19, 2024

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Years ago, our family-owned construction business received its only citation for violations from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, better known as OSHA. We were fined one hundred dollars and instructed to correct two items:

1. You must place signs throughout your job sites advising the workers to wear ear plugs
for noise protection and hearing safety.

And 2. You must install a horn on your forklift.

I showed it to my brother and said, 'This makes no sense. How is our team going to hear the horn on the forklift if they're wearing ear plugs? Don't we need to fight this?' My brother, who was also my business partner, wisely said, 'Paul, our lives will be a whole lot easier if we just put up the signs, buy the horn, and pay the hundred dollars,' which is exactly what we did.

The signs required by OSHA and the many signs we see every day do protect us from danger and help us get to the right place. 'Signs' in scripture often refer to what we would call miracles, events that defy natural or rational explanations. But they have this in common with many of our signs. They point us somewhere else. Often, they point us away from the miracle itself to what lies beneath it – the power of God not just to heal but to transform the whole person and to challenge the unjust systems surrounding her.

In our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, the strange signs of wind and fire point not to themselves but to the wild power of the Holy Spirit, unleashed not to scatter but to gather, unleashed not to destroy, but to re-create.

A person in need of re-creation was Thomas Gallaudet. As a child, Thomas loved to read, but he had weak eyes and difficulty breathing. He knew what it was like to see others running and playing, while he struggled with a constant cough. Thomas was president of the college debating team and graduated first in his class at Yale at age 17. In 1805, he was ordained as a minister, but turned down good job offers from churches because his eyes and lungs could not stand the strain. Thomas went back to live in his parents' home, where he also suffered from frequent nightmares, nervous attacks, and a deep sense of inadequacy.

One day across the yard, he noticed a number of kids playing together, and one little girl sitting alone. Thomas learned her name was Alice. She was 9 years old and she was both deaf and mute. He went over and gently tapped her shoulder. Alice spun around to see his lips silently say, 'My name is Thomas.' He picked up a stick and scratched the letters 'H A T' in a patch of dirt. Then he handed her his hat. Nothing happened. He scratched the letters H A T again and again, handing her his hat each time. Finally, she traced H A T with her fingers in the soft earth, then slapped the hat on her head with a smile as big as the sun! She started tapping her chest harder and harder. She said no words, but Thomas knew what she wanted. Together, they scratched out the letters 'A L I C E.' She grabbed Thomas's hand and dragged him into the house to meet her father. She scrawled A L I C E on a piece of paper. Then she swirled around and around, hugging herself with joy!

It turned out that Alice's father was Dr. Mason Cogswell, a wealthy physician who wanted to start a school for the deaf. He thought Thomas would be an excellent teacher. Dr. Cogswell sponsored Thomas to visit Europe and learn about the pioneering efforts underway there to educate and help deaf persons. He studied with a group in France that used fingerspelling to make letters and handshapes that represented whole words. Thomas invited one of the teachers, a deaf man named Laurent, to come back to the United States with him. On the long voyage, Thomas taught Laurent English and Laurent taught Thomas sign language. They put together a new sign language for the States, incorporating some signs that deaf people had worked out themselves, and some signs that American Indians used for communicating silently as they hunted. Together, they created American Sign Language or ASL, the fourth most used language in our country.

At the 10:30 service (Moments ago), Kell Christie Gary will sign (signed) a portion of our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. This will be (was) a gift to acknowledge a language that unlocked a new life for Alice and for all of us. Notice that when we

speak of ASL, signs are no longer simply nouns that point to something else. Signing becomes a verb. It is an active and animate means of direct communication. It is a miracle on the move. That's what the Holy Spirit is. Pentecost is the 'big bang' event that propels the Spirit throughout the world in ways we can't expect.

The Holy Spirit turns Peter,
an itinerant fisherman who denied Jesus three times,
into a bold, prophetic preacher.

The Holy Spirit turns Thomas Gallaudet,
a sick, weak, and depressed young man,
into a daring teacher and the co-creator of a language.

Thomas later married one of his deaf students, Sophia. They had eight children, including their son Thomas, an Episcopal priest, who carried on his father's work and became known as the 'Apostle to the Deaf.' Another son, Edward, became the first president of what is now known as Gallaudet University, the first liberal arts university designed specifically for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Thomas, Sr., faced many challenges over his life. People told him that deafness was a brain defect that could never be cured. Crowds threw rotten eggs at him during sign language demonstrations. Thomas was never deterred. In part through his strong faith and his memories of what a life-changing difference his first lesson meant to Alice. But in large part, it was due to the enduring encouragement of his wife Sophia. When Thomas felt tired from the scrapes of his work, Sophia would comfort him by signing,

'Dream.

Dream your dreams of what might be.'

At the heart of Peter's sermon on the First Pentecost are these words:

'God declares, 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 dream dreams.'

The letters 'H A T' made in the dirt by a 9-year old's hand turned out to be a sign of God's dream to create a resonant new world for deaf people and for all of us to learn, to understand, and to love together.

What dreams are the Spirit signing to us today?

Amen.