



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Listen for the Key of the Spirit

The Day of Pentecost, Year A, Acts of the Apostles 2:1-21

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

Five seconds before a performance one night, Miles Davis turned to his jazz band and said, 'Tonight, instead of the key of C, let's start the opening number in B flat.' The musicians all looked at each other with puzzled faces as if to say, 'can this song even be played in B flat?' The next thing they knew Miles said, '1, 2, 3, 4' and they began the song the way he said. They listened to each other more intensely than ever before to pick up on how to play off each other as they performed the song in this crazy new way.

Miles would later say that the times he made those last-second changes, the band made their best and most creative music. The band members had to be fully attuned to each other, to each beat and to the nuance of every sound, as if the musicians and their instruments were all in a reverent space of worship filled with call and response. They learned to improvise.

Today, we are all learning to improvise as we adjust to worshiping in a different space for a season. Improvisation is at the heart of our scripture passage from the Acts of the Apostles. It is the story of the Day of Pentecost with all sorts of strange images, sounds, and behaviors. We often emphasize the speaking in tongues, which is not described here as ecstatic speech, but as the real, genuine communication of speaking in known and different languages.

But what happened at Pentecost could more aptly be called, 'hearing in tongues,' or hearing and listening in a variety of languages. Notice how people from different countries and regions were able to *hear* the apostles speak in their own native languages. For many of them who had lived in Jerusalem for a long time, it may have been the first time to hear their native language in years. It did not matter what religion they practiced, if any. The Holy Spirit empowered them all to listen. This was a sign that the Spirit was to be a gift for connecting outsiders to insiders, a gift for connecting us all.

It is the reverse of the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in which the people attempted to build a tower to the heavens to cross by force the boundary between humanity and divinity. As a result, God scattered the people and confused their languages. They were no longer able to connive and build their way into heaven, because they could no longer understand each other.

At Pentecost, it is God who crosses the boundary between divinity and humanity. As a result, the human community begins to be mended. People are able to understand each other and are drawn together for the purposes of extending the realm of God. This time, instead of grasping vertically toward the heavens, the people reach out horizontally by listening and talking to each other. Much like

a jazz group, they play off each other. They build note by note, riff by riff, toward the ultimate reunion of all humanity with one another and with God.

It was said of Miles Davis that he knew how to create a space where fellow musicians could develop their attunement to each other and to the music. He developed a way of playing with the others that was highly conversational. Together, they encouraged each other to hear and respond, and they cultivated a unique capacity for paying attention. To Miles and his band, improvising was how they opened themselves for the sense of the possible.

Peter's speech at the end of our passage in Acts attempts to make sense of all the strange events that day, but more importantly, he points to the sense of the possible. He sees what was happening as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. God is pouring out his spirit on *all* flesh. Just as people from all nations and religions shared in the profound experience that just happened, the Holy Spirit is at work connecting us all, throughout the world.

The Holy Spirit is at work among all generations, with children given prophetic voices, young people inspired to see visions, and older people given renewal and peace as they dream of hope. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon those who have been enslaved and rendered powerless. Their prophetic voices will now be heard and acted upon. And the signs in the heavens, on earth, in the sun and moon, all point to a fundamental reshaping of creation. The scripture closes with, 'Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' We are saved not just for a distant after-life, but to listen for ways where we can be instruments of salvation in the here and now.

I see one of those instruments of salvation every time I go to get my car washed. A guy named Keith Marshall greets me. As a youth, Keith got mixed up with the wrong group and started selling drugs. He got caught and faced a 30-year sentence that was reduced to five years. After serving his time, he moved to California for a while. Keith struggled and remembered, 'All I had was God's favor. I guess God saw something in me that I didn't see.' When he returned to Memphis, he started his own cleaning business and got married. As he got to know his stepson, Keith heard a whole new and different key in the music of his life. His stepson is hearing-impaired. Keith learned that there were very few job opportunities, or other opportunities for that matter, for youth who are hearing-impaired. So, Keith started a car wash business to employ his stepson and a few of his friends. At first, they worked out of the parking lot of the Hibachi Grill. But more hearing-impaired friends showed up to work and more cars came to be washed. So, they moved to a larger space, thanks to the Anointed Temple of Praise, a neighboring church that offered to be a partner in ministry. Now the business and ministry, called Miracle Perfection, has 20 employees and staffers who are hearing-impaired.

When I go there to get my car washed, it's like watching a jazz ensemble. The young women and men give signs to each other to divvy up their tasks for cleaning the car. They pick up on each other's cues, whether through sign or intuition. There is a joy and rhythm in their work and in their support and love for one another. Keith said he's learned a lot from his team, including how to sign himself. Without saying a word, they all communicate intensely and lovingly to each other. Keith said, 'Most of our team members never interacted with persons who hear until they started the car wash.' He added, 'The business is constantly growing.' Keith is working to put different programs together for his team, including developing cooking and life skills, as well as opportunities for education and to learn other trades.

Three years ago, Keith was presented a proclamation for serving the community by the Shelby County Commission and received a standing ovation from all those assembled. Keith is a strong man who never cries, but he wept that morning. He thought about how his life had come full circle. A circle of listening for the cool life-giving breath of the Spirit during hard times. A circle of listening to the winds of the Spirit as they blew him in a surprising new direction to fulfill a life-changing need in our city. A circle of riffing on the sense of possibility.

As we worship in a different space this season, listen intensely for the different sounds of life calling us to play a new set of notes. Listen for the