

Sermon for the Day of Pentecost Year C

[RCL] Acts 2:1-21 or Genesis 11:1-9; Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, (25-27); Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Limiting Love

“Have I been with you all this time, Phillip, and still you do not know me?” This question, asked to Phillip in the Gospel today, jumps out at me, staring my doubt in the face. I would like to think that I know Jesus, that unlike the disciples *I* would be able to recognize Jesus. That *my* faith (unlike that of so many others) is unshakeable. This would paint a flattering self-portrait – but it would be one full of pride, arrogance, and denial. In reality, I know that this question is being asked of me – “Have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me?”

One of my favorite hymns lyrics is – “But we make God’s love too narrow, with false limits of our own”. I think, in part, this is the culprit for why I might not know God, in God’s fullness. I am guilty, of making God small enough to fit into the confines of my life and into the confines of my mind, instead of allowing myself to enter the breadth and depth of God.

In some ways, the Pentecost story of flaming tongues is about this very same breaking down of barriers. God will not be confined by a certain language and so becomes transcendent of it. Suddenly, the words we are using are one and the same. And this is not an erasure – it is not a homogenous system imposed by an empire on another people. Rather, it is a wide-open embrace – God meeting us, exactly where we are.

And in this way that God meets us, language seems particularly significant. We speak of our “mother tongue” not just because language is learned from our parents, but also because there is something about language and the culture it perpetuates that is soul-deep. It connects us to our mothers, and grandmothers – it connects us to our ancestors.

When I was nine years old, we moved from England, my father’s country, to Hawaii, my mother’s. My mom had tried to explain to us for years that we were kanaka maoli, indigenous people, but from an ocean away her words didn’t have meaning to me. I understood myself solely as British – I was in Brighton College, I wore a uniform, I was just like all of the other English children. Shortly after we moved to Hawaii, Leilani, my younger sister, was enrolled in a Hawaiian immersion pre-school. This became a family experience, complete with gardening every Friday, expectations of cleaning the classroom once a month, and Wednesday night language classes.

Sitting in that classroom, on the too-small chairs in the lingering heat of the afternoon sun, I first heard the language of my mother’s people. I heard it all at once, strung together in sentences, vowels cascading over each other in ways that sounded rich and full-bodied. I had only ever heard pieces before – like the drips from a kitchen faucet, and all of a sudden I was swimming in a salty open ocean, not understanding the cool blue water that enveloped

me. Something in me was soothed, and at peace. Something in me was connected. Something in me felt like I had finally come home.

This is the way God speaks to us, and longs to have relationship with us. In God's fullness, we are swimming in an open ocean, connected to something that feels like home. In the ways that are soul-deep, that connect us to who we have been, who we are, and who we will be. In this moment of Pentecost, when tongues of fire appeared over the heads of the disciples, God breaks down the barriers between what is divine and what is worldly, between what is sacred and what is profane, between what is me and what is you.

Suddenly, we can understand each other perfectly. Suddenly, I see you for who you really are, for the perfect image of God in which you are cast and there are no barriers. You are God, and so am I and we are talking to each other, sharing in this transcendence. Because we have allowed God to be big and deep and wide and broad, God is doing a new thing. "Have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me?" I miss God because I do not expect or look for the new things that God does. I do not look for creation anew. I expect to find God in church, maybe, but forget to see the breath of the Divine in the dewy spring grass. Or, I expect to meet God during my daily moment of prayer, maybe, but forget to see Divine fingerprints in the kindness of a stranger. I miss the ways that God is always with me, because I confine God with limits of my own. I stop seeing God travelling with me, because I build walls around where God "should" be. I dictate where I think God "belongs".

Instead of building up these walls, we are challenged by today's Gospel lesson to be open to seeing the Beloved in new ways. Jesus asks us to open our eyes wider, and see anew where God is in our lives. In doing so, we must heed Jesus' advice, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." I find a certain irony in having the lectionary pair together a reading about flaming tongues of fire with a reading that commands us not to be afraid. Sometimes, the new movement of God can be scary. It can be unfamiliar, and it takes us outside of who we think God to be, to open us up to who God is. As our barriers are broken down, we must hold on to the promise of God, "Peace I give to you – my peace I leave with you." When our barriers and limitations are broken, there will be an element of the unknown. And yet, in this unknown, we will be embraced – swimming in an ocean of God, feeling as if we have finally come home.

Written by Jazzy Bostock

Jazzy Bostock is a sun-loving, big-dreaming, laugh-adoring, God-praising Native Hawaiian woman, in my first year at seminary. She believes deeply in the power of kindness, compassion, gentleness, and most of all love. Jazzy is grateful for the opportunity God has given her to be here, and for all that God is. Mahalo piha.

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