

The Pause

Can you imagine this scene? Every year on this day we read and hear this text. And every year I am struck by how loud the scene must have been. The spirit's blowing in is described as the "howling of a fierce wind" in the text I just read. 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, Pentecost did not start on that morning. Pentecost was already a Jewish celebration, a harvest festival that celebrated the giving of the Law, the gift of God's word and covenant to the people of God to Moses at Sinai. Pilgrims from all over the region would make their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate, so the city was already filled with people and sounds from all over.

I want to try an experiment. I will count to three and then 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 across the room? 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 was different. Those gathered in Jerusalem from all over, could hear the apostles and could understand what they were saying, could understand the good news the disciples were proclaiming. Yes, the Holy Spirit was at work in the speaking, but the Spirit was at work in the hearing, in the listening, too.

A sweet video went viral this past week. 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, or at least responds as if he is responding to the child's words and reactions. The video is adorable as are the father and son, but it also gives a textbook example of how parents

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 write off or discount the child's speech as just noise. And he does not jump in and speak for his son. He trusts his son with the pause and listens.

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 the church plays along. On occasion, we are so desperate to get our voice heard over the din of the world's noise that we forget to listen, let alone pause.

The skeptics in the crowd on that Pentecost were quick to write off the apostles. They could not imagine that these rough-around-the-edges interlopers had anything worth hearing. They snorted and shrugged and decided 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 was a typical result of being intoxicated. While some welcomed the gift of hearing these disciples' "declar[ing] the mighty works of God," others were quick to rebuff it. Even when they are offered the very best news, there are some who will choose to ignore the message because of who the messenger is.

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

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

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 you wouldn't expect. 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 were not the voices the people tended to listen to; these were not the preachers they were inclined to hear. What about us? Who are we inclined to listen to? Who are we more likely to give a hearing? For whom am I willing to pause?

One of our affirmations of faith has us declaring that we will "hear the voices of those long silenced."² I'm pretty sure those voices were never truly silent. My suspicion is that those of us with privilege and control were—and maybe are—just simply really good at holding them at more than arm's length and tuning them out as we fill the pauses with our own answers or maybe even our 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 suffer without clean water to drink and clean air to breathe. But I've been too quick to fill the pauses with the answers I'd rather hear.

And so I wonder what I'm missing, what the church is missing when we blow through the pauses, when I fill the silence with my words. What saving word do I need to hear from my gay brothers and sisters, from my sisters and brothers from developing nations, my brothers and sisters who are working two or three jobs or the ones who are on welfare or huddled under bridges or wrestling with addiction or PTSD? What might God want me to hear in the voices of the ones who do not vote like me, the ones who feel forgotten or undervalued or ignored? What could God be trying to tell me through the veteran with PTSD, the trans woman, or the black high schooler? "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 just 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.

² PCUSA *Brief Statement of Faith*

I've got good reasons to tune them out—or so I tell myself: they make me uncomfortable; their words make me 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; they 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 am able to trust the pause and listen, they 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.

And so my hope this Pentecost is that we will welcome the wind that blows in and keeps filling us anew. And that we will answer the call to listen, to pause. Because I believe that if we can find a way to trust the 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 trust the pause, to listen 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.