

# *Preaching Diversity*

Jennifer Lee

Atlanta Citizen Advocacy, Atlanta, Georgia

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Act 2:4, NIV).

In most areas of the country called the United States, the sounds of diversity and the sounds of many languages can be heard. The wonders of God, prophecies, and visions are spoken by every woman and man - of every race, creed, background, class, and age. Testimonies and wonders of all kinds are shared and proclaimed in grocery stores, in public parks, at state hospitals, in fast-food restaurants. God's Spirit rests on "all people" (Acts 2:17). The languages are many and God's wonders are diverse; they cannot be counted. Are these diverse testimonies and visions being proclaimed in our churches? What languages, stories, and wonders are being told and proclaimed from the pulpit? Do the sermons we preach reflect the diverse visions of God's people, or do they reflect a narrow vision so as not to rock the boat and make the elders uncomfortable?

During the Pentecost celebration in Acts 2:1-21, more than one miraculous event occurred. The greatest miracle is God's gift of the Holy Spirit, but the miracles resulting from that gift are enormous. After the Holy Spirit filled these first Christians, languages of every nation came from their mouths. When the Holy Spirit rested upon that band of believers, surely not even the meekest and mildest among them could remain quiet. They were compelled to speak out the wonders of God in languages not their own. The miracles continue. Hearing a bunch of Galileans speaking in their native tongues, Jews from every nation were drawn together. Some, hearing of God's wonders, became very curious and wanted to know more. Some, in disbelief, said, "They have had too much wine" (2:13).

Another miracle becomes apparent - the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in Joel 2:28. These people are not drunk off of wine, Peter proclaimed. They are high on the Holy Spirit; God's promise through Joel has been fulfilled (2:17-21). All of God's people - men, women, sons, daughters, young, old, Jews and Gentiles - will prophesy. With the dawning of that Pentecost came God's Spirit poured out on "all people," on all humanity, so that all may prophesy and proclaim God's wonders. The wonders spoken on that Pentecost, as the wonders spoken from that day forward, are spoken in all languages from all people of all backgrounds, races, creeds, colors. According to this promise, the Holy Spirit does not discriminate, but rejoices in diversity. All the events recorded in Acts 2 embrace the miracle of diversity.

The diverse "languages" or "tongues" referred to in Acts 2 are most likely those languages spoken by the different nations represented. Even today, different national and tribal languages are still one of the most difficult barriers to overcome. However, humanity has somehow created within this society other false barriers that we deem as equally difficult to overcome. These barriers are certainly comparable to the different languages separating the diverse nations represented in Acts 2. Instead of rejoicing in the blessing of diversity, humanity seems to flee from it. Not only do we divide ourselves by national languages, we, as well, divide ourselves into groups by

educational and economic backgrounds, race, age, gender, and numerous other labels. "Oceans may no longer divide (humanity) but 'curtains' of various kinds do constitute invincible 'walls of partition' among which the ideological and racial are deemed to be the most serious kind. These walls do not keep one nation apart from another, but turn every nation into a 'house divided against itself.'"¹ As a result of false divisions humanity has imposed upon itself, many visions and prophecies of the Holy Spirit are never shared between these divisions.

Although raised in the segregated South (as it still is), I grew accustomed to hearing diverse stories and visions - which seemed like foreign languages to my ears - in school, in the grocery store, and in the public park. Some of these visions sounded strange, some of them were intriguing, and some of them caused discomfort. However, the uncomfortable and strange visions and stories were not often heard in churches I attended. In the sermons, I frequently heard testimonies reflecting my own experiences and background. The sermons usually contained the messages with which I could be comfortable and the wonders of God to which my family and I were accustomed.

Thus, initially, writing sermons posed little threat for me. Based on many sermons I had heard in the past, I could pick out a scripture and preach about how I experienced it in my own sheltered world. Writing sermons in my own language and the language of those like me, I could preach a good fifteen minutes and get firm handshakes and warm hugs from the congregation.

The challenge of writing sermons became more difficult, yet exciting, when I studied under Professor Lucy Rose. Lucy Rose challenged her students to realize that many of the sermons students write only reflected their own languages and backgrounds; however, these sermons do not reflect the diversity of God's people and the diversity of God's wonders. She taught that those different experiences, those diverse testimonies, those intriguing visions, and even those uncomfortable prophecies, which could be heard in the stores, parks, and other public spaces, should be contained in the proclamations coming from our mouths.

Opening ourselves to new languages and visions could not occur in the classroom. Seminary, books and journals, and continuing education classes may indeed give us the nuts and bolts of writing a smooth, theologically and politically correct sermon. Yet, the Holy Spirit gives us the sermon. The Holy Spirit moves us to proclaim God's wonders in all languages. The Holy Spirit opens people to diversity. The Holy Spirit will compel us to speak the wonders of Jesus Christ as all people experience them. Diversity must shine forth and be heard by our congregations. Diverse languages, visions, and wonders cannot be learned behind the antiseptic walls of academia. Therefore, Professor Rose required that her students go outside of their comfort zones and their antiseptic world to soup kitchens, to night shelters, to a day care for homeless children, and to housing projects. We were required to go to those places where the voices could be heard that are not always spoken from the mainline pulpit. As a result, we were introduced to whole communities of neighbors desiring to communicate their visions and to convert those of us caught in our webs of self-centeredness.

The difficulty of bringing different languages into sermons lies in that we have segregated ourselves in our clubs, our neighborhoods, and even in our churches. The "Declaration of Faith" (Presbyterian Church USA) states, "The diversity in the early church caused tension and conflict. Yet the Spirit bound them into one body, enriched

by their differences.” Do most of today’s churches reflect such diversity? The Holy Spirit, speaking through the believers, gathered people from “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). Are we as ministers proclaiming messages that bring people of all backgrounds together? The powerful have often forced segregation, usually based on race, gender, age, or disability, on the “less powerful” groups. This segregation is reflected in our sermons. Many sermons lack the languages, the stories, the visions, and the wonders of God that make up God’s diverse creation. This phenomena is not always directly a minister’s fault. We all do it subconsciously because we usually speak out of our own experiences and the experiences of those like us.

Yet, through the Holy Spirit, ministers are prophets and preachers called to proclaim the visions and prophecies of God in all their diversity. What languages are contained within the sermons, the testimonies, and prophecies preached from the pulpit? As leaders in the church, we must encourage the congregation to be open to God’s diverse creation. How can this openness be possible if our sermons and proclamations do not reflect such diversity? Do we dare allow different languages to show forth in our proclamations? Are we even aware of those different, uncomfortable languages? What languages and visions are shut out of our sermons? Why? Are we afraid that we might receive some of the same responses that the first Christians received?

Bringing in other languages raises curiosity, as the first Christians found. Different languages and voices will peak people’s curiosity and interest; diversity will raise eyebrows, and the pastor speaking diverse languages will be noticed. Ministers may not always like the kind of attention different languages will bring. For example, what if the elders of the church came to you after a sermon and asked, “Pastor, what did *you* have to drink this morning?” If we read further in Acts, we find that the first Christians suffered much persecution as a result of their prophecies. As persecutions continued and grew fiercer for this band of believers, being called “drunk” must have been considered a compliment.

So funny stares and rude remarks may be inevitable when entering into the ministry of diversity. But, how can we open ourselves up to these new languages and visions? Perhaps we could ask, “What wonders of God are being ignored? What languages are brought into our sermons? Whose stories are we telling?” Particular voices most certainly are omitted from many sermons. As ministers, how often do we walk into the state hospital or into a housing project or into a soup line to ask our neighbors, “Do you have any prophecies to share? Or visions? What visions have you had lately?” When we ask these questions, are we afraid of what we might learn?

David Peters teaches us that a disabled body does not hold within its bounds a disabled spirit. At twenty-two, he lives in segregation along with many other individuals in an institution called a nursing “home.” With his statement, “I don’t belong here,” David shares with us Jesus Christ’s vision of the true Christian community. The true Christian community surrounds all its people, young and old, with love and care - especially those with muscular dystrophy and similar labels.

Through Lydia James, the Holy Spirit speaks a language of confidence that God is in control despite all the so-called chaos within the world. At forty-seven, she has been passed from family member, to state institution, to the street, to the “personal care home,” to the street, to the psychiatric unit, to the street. Yet, she prevails and remains strong. She enjoys her coffee in the morning when she can afford it, and she shares

the little food she has with her neighbors in need.

In Joe Dan Walker, the vision of God's Kingdom is within him wherever he goes. He carries his ancestry of men and women of all colors and diverse nations - Irish, African, and Cherokee. Growing up in the South as a sharecropper's son and as a man of African descent, Joe Dan automatically had to struggle to prove his worth as a human being and as a child of God to the people who denied his humanity. At forty-one, with a troubled and painful past that still haunts him, Joe Dan looks forward to the time when all people accept God's unconditional love. He proclaims, "The Kingdom of God is already here! People just don't want to accept it." Accepting God's Kingdom, he teaches, would mean denying "race" and other divisions that really do not even exist. In this day and time, Joe Dan's vision is called "incredible" or "impossible." However, without this vision in our sermons and in our churches, we are denying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These visions, stories, and prophecies are right under our noses. They can be heard in the local nursing home and mental institutions, in the home of the family struggling to pay the gas bill, and in the neighborhoods where drugs and guns are more common than bread and milk. We all have visions, but without all the visions of God's people spoken and proclaimed, we are nowhere near to having the complete picture and nowhere close to recognizing the Kingdom of God. That is just it. Without the visions, prophecies, and languages that are often kept out of mainline sermons, we are only preaching an incomplete gospel, at the most. The Holy Spirit compels us to rejoice in diversity and to proclaim it in all languages from the pulpit. Without the blessing of diversity embraced by all of God's people, the false walls of separation will continue to cause distrust and misunderstanding. "To understand truly is to live someone else's experience...To love truly, as Martin Luther put it, is to 'put on one's neighbor.'"<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

1 Daisuke Kitagawa, "Pentecost and the Divided World," in *Preaching on Pentecost and Christian Unity*, ed. Alton M. Motter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 112.

2 Franklin H. Littell, "Chicago and the Gathering of the Nations," in *Preaching on Pentecost and Christian Unity*, ed. Alton M. Motter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 119.