

I have to confess that I have learned humility through various means throughout my life... I know that many of you share this life lesson with me. I won't ask you to share your moments of the epiphany that, you might, in fact be wrong. You can tell me at the door if you want. For example, when I was younger, I would run somewhere on the order of 25 miles a week. Consequently, I couldn't imagine why anyone wouldn't go bounding up the mountain for a quick workout while on vacation. Fast forward a few years to a cervical disc compression and I suddenly knew exactly why people favor their aching back and go for the rocking chair rather than the vertical hike. Another example: I used to get completely out of sorts when someone would get in the left lane and go slower than traffic. Okay, I still get out of sorts with that. But in the era of my life that postdates a ticket I got on the DC beltway for blowing past the farm-equipment in the left lane by passing on the right, I still get frustrated but I wait. Atlanta has been a growth experience for me in this regard. Perhaps it has for you too?

Another of my life lessons occurred around the matter of speaking in tongues. Now I should probably give you some background here. I was skeptical of what I hadn't encountered in my rather less than religiously diverse background. I grew up Presbyterian. I admit I am proud of my Presbyterian heritage, I can trace it back hundreds of years to Scotland and even a little further to Switzerland, or at least so my dad claims. And to be fair, we Presbyterians, and I may as well just go ahead and say it, particularly Caucasian Presbyterians such as the church I grew up in, are not known in the world for our charismatic worship.

I know, shocking, isn't it? In my rather sheltered upbringing I didn't know that there was a whole other world of church experience. All I knew was the Baptists wanted to hold you under water until the preacher was convinced your sins were gone and the Methodists had a turnstile in their pulpit while we Presbyterians alone stood pristine with our committees.

I hadn't been in Princeton very long before a classmate of mine invited me to attend her church in New Jersey with her. It was about a 45 minute drive away, and as we left to go to church she informed me that we would eat at the church and she'd have me home around 4. (The church was only 45 minutes away and it was 10 a.m.)

"Just what in the world are we going to do all day?"

"Well, we're going to church."

"For four hours?"

"Yes, unless the preacher gets on a tear and is longwinded today."

What followed was a four-hour crash course in Pentecostal charismatic worship. The choir was loud, the drums were beating and energy just pulsed through the congregation. The preacher stood up and was thundering about justice, and folks were hollering back at him, "Amen" and so forth. Every once in a while someone would say, "help him, Lord." My host leaned over and explained that this meant the preacher was on dangerous ground.

Then, the worship hit a fever pitch. The choir was dancing back and forth, the preacher was preaching up a storm – it was the middle of July and I had already sweated through my suit coat, and then an immaculately dressed older woman who looked like a strong

wind might just blow her away stood up. Again the whispered rubric was in my ear,
“She’s about to prophesy!”

At that moment, this tiny woman burst into a full-throated proclamation in words that were unintelligible to me and it was as if electricity shot through the congregation. Then I noticed some women dressed in white flanking the prophet, and my friend again leaned over and said, “They think she’s going to be slain in the spirit.”

Now this one I knew. My brother is an emergency physician, but on his way up the ladder, he did just about every job in the hospital. When we were in college he worked in hospital as a patient transporter, which is about as glamorous as it sounds. I went to the emergency room one day to meet him for lunch on a Sunday afternoon... this was back when you could still just walk in... and as we were getting ready to go, the nurse walked by and said, “Before you go, we have a DFO we need in room 5.”

“Go ahead,” my brother said, “This might take a few minutes.”

“What’s a DFO?” I asked.

“Done Fell Out.”

“What?”

“Done Fell Out... ‘Slain in the Spirit.’ Passed out while speaking in tongues.”

Like I said: a religiously sheltered upbringing.

This was all very, very new to me.

What I could tell you about that moment in that worship service was that something palpably real had happened. I didn’t understand it; I had no idea what the prophet said. But I knew something had happened, something my very Presbyterian background had never prepared me to encounter.

I needed help understanding what had happened so I turned to my friend Carmen. We've lost touch, but what you need to know about Carmen is that she was, and I assume still is, a woman that commanded notice and respect. A drop-dead stunning woman, she used her beauty-queen scholarship to attend Harvard. Poised, attractive and intelligent – and she was a Pentecostal minister on top of all that.

I described my experience on Sunday to her and added, “And I don't understand it. Something very tangible happened, but I didn't understand a word.”

She replied, “You may never understand it. It may not be your spiritual gift to understand it. You shouldn't feel bad about this... it's not your faith tradition and that may not be how the Spirit reaches you, but now you respect it, don't you?”

I had to admit that I did. And what made it a watershed moment was that I hadn't always. I had understood the second chapter of Acts to mean just what it read, that each understood in their own language what was being proclaimed. I always assumed that the Greeks heard Greek, the Israelites heard Hebrew, the Parthians heard Parthian, and to be perfectly honest, I still did, and I still do. But after that experience of worship, it came to me that she didn't have to be wrong for me to be right. The paradigm of Christian faith shifted beneath my feet: the work of the Spirit is not a zero-sum game.

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever had that moment where suddenly *it all changed*?

That's what happened that day. All the text tells us is that a huge sound rushed through the house. It was as if the wind was blowing. The Spirit rested on each as if a tongue of fire, and suddenly languages weren't an obstacle anymore.

Languages, you recall, were an obstacle from just about the very beginning of the Bible. Languages united tribes and sects – being able to communicate is important – and languages divided the tribes and the sects from one another. Genesis uses the story of the scrambling of our languages as an object lesson on the danger of pride and confusing ourselves with God. The people were scattered from one another with their languages; divided up into groups by who shared a common tongue.

And then, all the sudden, no more. Just like that, in the power of God, everything changed.

Everything changed... Peter, Jesus' disciple who timidly huddled around the fire with strangers after the trial of Jesus, who spat his terrified denial that he knew Jesus into the faces of those who recognized him, was transformed from the frequently stumbling fisherman who alternated between declaring that Jesus is the Christ to denying him three times into a preacher.

He stood and preached. In the power of the Spirit, he stood and preached.

It's no wonder that Presbyterians are a little bit leery of the Spirit. The Spirit is powerful! The Spirit changes things!

This past week someone said to me, about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, "Some people who claim to have the Holy Spirit make me nervous."

I know a great number of Christians, Presbyterian and otherwise, who would agree!

There's something about the Spirit that we're not quite comfortable with – forget that Jesus called the Spirit the advocate and the comforter – what's to be uncomfortable with that?

Nonetheless people get a little leery of the Spirit. Particularly Presbyterians. A Baptist colleague of mine likes to tease me about our Trinitarian formula, you know: Father, Son, and oh wait, what's that third one?

He never gets tired of that tired old joke.

But what if he's right? Are we afraid of the Spirit? Maybe I'm wrong but I think there's just something very unsettling about the idea that the Spirit could just blow right on in here and change things.

I think we're secretly afraid that we might start speaking in tongues.

I was in a meeting not very long ago. It was a Committee on Ministry for our Presbytery. That's the committee that oversees ministers and congregations. We mostly vote on rather uninteresting things like sexual misconduct policies and minimum terms of call, but every once in a while, something interesting will come up. We were nearing the end of our meeting and our executive Presbyter, that's Tom Evans, stood up to make his report. Tom, like any minister, deals with a fair number of mundane and boring details. We all like to make like we're solving spiritual crises every day, but mostly we're looking at the cost of paper products for the church and scratching our heads. Tom was covering some rather normal details – the sorts of things an Executive Presbyter has to deal with and then he came to the end of his report and he began to talk about an immigrant fellowship that is meeting down in south Atlanta and how they wanted to build a building, to have something permanent in their community to mark their presence. And then, and this is the absolute truth, the door from outside blew open.

One of us got up and shut the door and Tom continued to speak. And as he continued to speak, he grew more and more passionate about our commitment to this immigrant

fellowship, about how a presbytery that claims to be the churches of Jesus Christ of the Presbyterian variety, cannot turn its back on those in our midst who yearn to have what we have – not out of grasping for stuff, but out of a sense of calling to make their presence known in their community. As he was speaking, tears began rolling down his face and ultimately he stopped. At the moment that he stopped speaking, there was a pregnant pause and a woman on our committee finally broke the holy silence with the words, “Let us pray.”

“Gracious God, your spirit has blown into this room,” she prayed.

When the Spirit blows in, things get unsettled.

When the Spirit blows in, everything changes.

If we’re satisfied with the way things are, when the Spirit blows in, we may begin to squirm just a bit. We may begin fidgeting because, whether we heard tongues – foreign languages, or *glossolalia*, the supposedly angelic language of the Pentecostal tradition, whatever the Spirit’s movement, it is a cosmos-shaking, change-making, electrifying encounter.

The Spirit does that to the church, every once in a while.

Once, I was kvetching about something I didn’t think the Presbyterian church was making sufficient progress addressing and a friend of mine turned to me and said,

“You do realize that it took God 1500 years to get around to reforming the church the first time? I’m not sure that you’re going to be able to force the Spirit’s hand.”

I suppose that puts a little perspective on the sometimes glacially slow processes we see at work in the church. Indeed I wonder if it puts in perspective some of the processes we see in our lives. So often it is when we look back that we see the Spirit at work. I, for

instance, didn't realize when I was sitting in that charismatic church listening to the preacher and the prophet that the Spirit was at work on me: reshaping the way I viewed worship and church and the diverse richness of God's people in whom God delights. Here's the thing about the Holy Spirit: it ought to make us unsettled. We don't get to decide when and where the Spirit will work. Frankly, despite the fact that I might have a list of personal projects that I would like the Holy Spirit to take on, God does not appear at present to have consulted me on the Spirit's work-flow.

Here's the other thing about the Holy Spirit: I have been talking about the work of the Spirit on us in the corporate sense. And yes, we are being shaped and changed and moved all the time. But there is another element I wish to leave you with: that of the Spirit moving on us personally.

You see, we are all redeemed and we are all in the *process* of being redeemed. We're works in progress, every one of us. We don't see the final product. We get a glimpse, now and then, but rarely more. But we know that God is working for the good.

There are, to be sure, times when the good seems so far off. There are times when the waited for, hoped for redemption that we need in our lives, the justice the preacher was preaching for, the healing the prophet promised, seem so far off as to be unreachable.

It is in those moments that the Spirit prays for us, Paul says, with sighs too deep for words, *with sighs too deep for words*.

The Spirit, present at creation, present at the baptism of Jesus, present all the time, prays for you and for me. The universe-making, cosmos-shaking, reformation causing Spirit prays for you and for me, to keep us faithful until that day when it is all changed, when more than we could ever ask or imagine is realized.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.