

A Pentecost Blessing by the Rev. Jan Richardson

<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/06/05/pentecost-one-searing-word/>

On the day
when you are wearing
your certainty
like a cloak
and your sureness
goes before you
like a shield
or like a sword,

may the sound
of God's name
spill from your lips
as you have never
heard it before.

May your knowing
be undone.

May mystery
confound your
understanding.

May the Divine
rain down
in strange syllables
yet with
an ancient familiarity,
a knowing borne
in the blood,
the ear,
the tongue,
bringing the clarity
that comes
not in stone
or in steel
but in fire,
in flame.

May there come
one searing word:
enough to bare you
to the bone,
enough to set
your heart ablaze,
enough to make you
whole again.

Our family (which at the time included Cheryl and I, along with a not yet 2-year old Lily, and a 4-week old Isla) arrived in Regina on May 4, 2014.

Elizabeth and David Calam met us at the airport our car having been delivered by a moving truck some weeks earlier.

It was May.

It was snowing.

But since there wasn't a return flight to Ontario until early the next morning, and since we were assured that the forecast was calling for a sunny afternoon, we agreed to step out of the airport.

We're glad we did.

The afternoon was indeed sunny and seasonably pleasant.

That September I was invited to attend a new ministers' welcome event hosted by Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church of Canada which was being held at Queens House Retreat Centre in Saskatoon.

There were 5 of us there from out of province or out of country, plus several St Andrew's Students who were about to embark on their 2-year Ministry internship.

The weeklong event was designed to orient new ministers to the unique context of the United Church in this Province, it included a trip to Wanuskewin Heritage Park, a visit to farm in the midst of harvest, a visit with the Affirming Ministries Coordinator of the Conference, as well as a number of more technical sessions on the working of the Conference Structure, plus plenty of space to ponder our shared moment of transition as well as some more light-hearted community building and getting to know our new home.

One evening we played the Saskatchewan Lingo game, which worked sort of like Balderdash...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5L0L7do6zs>

If you recall how that game works, each round begins with a word for which no one playing knows the definition. Each player offers up a plausible sounding guess, secretly writing it down and then all the false definitions are read, in random order with the real definition mixed in.

One gets points both by guessing the correct definition and for each person who chooses your false definition.

In this version, we were given SK terms like matrimonial cake and bunnyhug.

One I remember in particular was when the game leader wrote on the white board

BIENFAIT

Being unaware that this was the name of a small town east of Estevan, but recognizing that it seemed to be French for *well done*, and knowing the importance of CFL my guess was that...

A Bienfait is when the Riders are playing the Alouettes and Montreal tries for a 2-point conversion but the Riders defense blocks it. A dramatic fourth quarter comeback pulled the Alouettes back within 1point, until their attempt to seal their victory was thwarted by a dramatic goal line Bienfait by inside linebacker #55. Next week the Riders play Hamilton at which point they will attempt to accomplish a Cat's Pajamas securing their playoff hopes!

<https://www.bienfait.ca/>

The game was fun, even it didn't actually equip me or any of my fellow participants to speak more fluent Saskatchewan.

In the Christian story, on Pentecost Sunday, Jesus' community of followers is filled with the Holy Spirit and suddenly able to speak in languages, that they have never learned to speak.

In so doing, the community is transformed with many people joining the early Church.

The Lectionary pairs this reading with a vivid image from the Hebrew Prophetic Tradition, the prophet Ezekiel who is commanded by the Holy One to speak to a valley of bones at which point they reassemble into human form.

And then Ruach – Hebrew for breath or wind or spirit enters them – and they live again.

Ezekiel comes in a moment of great fracture in the community of Israel, both a time of the community abandoning their moral call to justice, and during a time of military occupation and imprisonment on the part of the Babylonian Empire.

So the imagery of bones coming back together is a powerful image of community restored.

The Jewish and Christian narrative repeatedly point to the power of speech.

In the creation poem of the first book of Moses, it is through speaking that the world comes into being.

In Jewish mysticism, words are the building blocks of creation.

Then the Christian Scripture, in the book of John, picks up the motif of Genesis

In the Beginning was the Word

I've been thinking of this imagery...

How it is in the use of new words that something creative happens.

This is reflected in the blessing from Jan Richardson

On the day
when you are wearing
your certainty
like a cloak
and your sureness
goes before you
like a shield
or like a sword,

may the sound
of God's name
spill from your lips
as you have never
heard it before.

Certainty like a cloak and sureness like a sword and shield are wondrously undermined by the sound of God's name spilling from lips as we have never heard before.

An expansive Glossolalia (the Greek term for speaking in tongues)

In this case, a speaking in tongues that makes possible that which was hereto impossible.

The idea of multilingual church community can be picked up literally

Some may have seen the moving Pentecost service created to lift up Asian voices in the United Church which we shared online earlier this week...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS_WfmlxsdM

If you have 30 minutes, I would invite you to give it a try. It is subtitled, but it's an expanding practice, especially for those with a deep history with this tradition to hear what are perhaps familiar words, tunes, and stories, coming through languages and accents that are unfamiliar.

To intentionally place yourself out of the centre...yet still part of the circle.

Others may have read the inspiring Mission and Service story featuring the story of the M&S supported Quinte Deaf Fellowship in Belleville, ON

<https://united-church.ca/stories/celebrate-deaf-culture-pentecost>

We might also think along this line of the recovery of Indigenous languages, the loss of which is one of the horrific legacies of the Residential School System. It's a lamentable and important spot for reflection, how a faith that reverses the power of words and a Spirit that blesses difference sought to deny and destroy this very thing.

I also thought this week of the expansive power of learning new ways of speech even if they are not literally new languages.

In our discussions that lead up to our vote to become an Affirming Ministry, we were invited, as a community, to expand the words with which we speak about gender, learning the expansive possibilities of non-binary or gender non-confirming language.

Can we see this as an expansive act of Glossolalia – speaking in tongues, saying new words that make possible the affirmation of others, and expand our own possibilities of what we mean when as a community speak the word “we”?

Learning to fluently add one's pronouns as part of an introduction or in this moment of online connection, one's Zoom title. Learning to replace the traditional *Dear Brothers and Sister* of our Scripture Readings with *Dear Siblings*.

All of these speech acts have the potential to expand ourselves.

When we become fluent in speaking of the land upon which we find ourself with its Treaty Designation or naming its ancestral caretakers – learning to wrap our heads and mouths around the words like *settler* or *whiteness*. When we challenge ourselves with these words and the ideas that they represent we find ourselves equipped to enter into new dialogues and discussions that can expand the possibilities of what we imagine it means to be communities transformed by justice.

An expansive Glossolalia doesn't only mean new vocabulary, but also, I would suggest developing the capacity to speak about subjects that we may have been reluctant to name, yet whose silence

Speaking about mental health, about racism and misogyny in organizations that we understand to be neutral or even justice seeking, speaking about bullying and violence, these are hard conversations both in that they require courage, but also given that in so many spaces, we not only lacked the capacity to hold these conversations, but have in many spaces, actively sought to avoid them...which lays the weight of bringing these things forward, unduly on those who are already burdened by the inequity through which these show up in community.

And when courageous speech is met with scrutiny and suspicion, it is no wonder that so many simply choose to remain silent, or exit unobtrusively through the side door.

This spirit fuelled yearning for a Glossolalia that expands our possibilities to be able to do hard things like speak of harm caused within communities, exclusion, power, this is not only a matter of practicing new ways of speaking but new ways of hearing and listening.

Of demanding from ourselves a muscularity to sit with discomfort, to recognize our tendencies towards fear and shame that limit the sorts of conversations with which we are able to engage and by consequence limits the issues we can address and the communities that we can become.

The imagery of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, broken and disjointed, disconnected and parched in the sun...this speaks powerfully to areas of relationships and connection where we feel the pain and sadness of separation yet struggle to move our mouths into the conversations that might stitch this brokenness together.

The heat and intensity of the fiery Pentecost imagery sometimes longs for the soothing pneuma/ruach of divine breath, or Holy Sophia, that calms and speaks courageous words like...

I don't know if I can do that, but I want to learn

I am scared of what is to come

I am grieving that which feels lost

Words like these that touch our own pain that we fear to speak and so instead so often rely on blame, projection and dismissal.

For a few weeks I have repeated a line from our Open Table Dinner Church Liturgy based on one of the Communion Prayers from *If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for an Evolutionary Mystic*.

*Holy One, Holy Oneness,
known in the longing within our atoms for connection,
the urge within each molecule for self-expression,
the knowing within each cell of its dignity.*

In a world in which so much feels like the valley of disconnected bleached bones how can we sink beneath the tumult and turmoil and enter that fertile place of openness to connection where each our cells knows its own dignity borne of a genuine space of self-love and compassion.

Can we claim this as our DNA?

An expression of Divinity?

We might call it a birthright yet one that we tragically long for, grieve the absence of, while dwelling in a culture that denies and shames that for which we so deeply yearn...caught in the maintenance of systems and patterns and habits that violate and repress, Demanding and valorizing stoic detachment.

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in strange syllables
yet with

an ancient familiarity,
a knowing borne
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in flame.

I wonder what sorts of conversation you might long to have within your relationships, communities and connections?

What sorts of strange syllables you might long to speak that honour the truth you bear within?

I wonder what deep longing responses to unasked questions dwell within you?

I wonder how we might learn to name where we have been hurt?

I wonder how we might learn to name that which we need?

I wonder how we might learn to hear these things?

How might learning both new ways of speaking, but also developing capacity for conversations we have avoided, create new possibilities within our relationships and communities.

Could it be that our Pentecost calling is to partner with Spirit, trusting she beckons us gently and animates our rigorous commitment to accountable community to speech which does not violate yet rests in vulnerability and empathy.

Genuine self-regard and compassion that need not be clung to with white knuckled grasping.

You yourself of course, will know best the context wherein you might practice this posture of compassionate curiosity, where Ezekiel's valley of dry bones might lie for you.

May you also therein know the brewing of holy wisdom, ruach, pneuma

May we nourish the divine dissatisfaction churning within

This glossolalia of yearning

May we tend to the grief for what is not yet but what we know to be possible

May we speak in the service of that

which longs to be born within us and among us and between us

O Holy One,

O Holy Oneness
our prayer is a hunger for wholeness,
an insatiable appetite for completion,
a sighing for coherence.

You burn within us as the intuition of greater freedom,
of deeper meaning,
of a brighter future,

for us,
our families,
our communities,
and our world.

May it be so.