

Whether we are raised in the church or not, whether we were raised in a Trinitarian theology or not, those of us here likely would profess faith in the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. However you image the Holy Trinity, I would feel pretty confident saying that the Holy Spirit is probably the least-explored, least understood member of the Trinity in most Presbyterian churches. We tend to think in binaries – either the Holy Spirit is experienced in churches that speak in tongues and dance in the aisles or the Holy Spirit is experienced individually, in nature, in the inspiration of our reading of the written word in worship, something more quiet and reserved and intellectual. Neither of those experiences – or any other experience of the Holy Spirit is wrong in any way. But let's not box in the Holy Spirit because I think She - I hear her in a feminine voice – speaks and acts and lives and breathes among us in so many more ways than those we most often imagine the Spirit to be.

Pentecost is a great Sunday to consider the Holy Spirit's identity and work, but don't forget that the Spirit did not emerge on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit hovered over the face of the waters at creation. The Holy Spirit breathed life into the first human beings. Mary was found pregnant with Jesus by the Holy Spirit. When Mary visited Elizabeth, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove at his

baptism. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples, sending them into the world. According to our scriptures, the Spirit gives people the right words to say in times of trial and persecution. The Spirit helps us interpret the written words of scripture for our time and place, moving each of our hearts toward what God wants us to understand. The Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words. The Holy Spirit appears as a bird, as flame and fire, as breath and wind, as a life-giving, forward-moving energy of God.

And today, our readings from Genesis and Acts show us the Holy Spirit as interpreter.

In 2012, I was privileged to be part of a group of Presbyterians joining Ecumenical Women as delegates to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women at the UN headquarters in New York. Ecumenical Women, an organization led by a plethora of Christian denominations, sends a group of women to the Commission each year to give voice to the concerns of the Church regarding women. The Church Center at the United Nations hosts the groups, providing training, worship, and events in which Christian women get together and dialogue about what they have learned in attending the United Nations government delegate events across the street at headquarters. Another delegate and I both were fluent in French, so we were tapped to provide simultaneous interpretation for the church women from Cameroon in the worship services

and conferences. We wore headsets and interpreted simultaneously, switching from English to French and French to English, sometimes several hours a day, tag-teaming so we didn't wear ourselves out. I attended events at the UN headquarters as well, with UN interpreters providing language services. I heard Turkish, Arabic, and other languages I do not understand, in my own language, English, as the speakers were speaking.

In the same week I was in the UN building attending conferences on women, a diplomatic delegation from Syria was present in the building, having talks with Security Council representatives about the war. From the lens of being a non-professional interpreter, I imagined how crucial the work of the UN interpreters was in those meetings and how much weight they must have carried to communicate well and convey understanding among those present. Truly, interpretation is a miracle and a crucial one for the well-being of the world.

You may have heard it called "translation," but translation is written; interpretation is verbal. And interpretation is vastly different than translation. While translation is a direct, written transformation of the same words and expressions from one language to another, interpretation conveys meaning beyond words and expressions. Interpretation conveys tone, cultural undertones, and a more generalized summation than translation. In other words, interpretation gets

beyond the words and right into the meaning of those words and closer to the real-world implication of those words.

There are two types of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. In smaller meetings, consecutive interpretation is usually used, while in large-group meetings and conferences, simultaneous interpretation is used almost invariably. This requires a lot of attention and loads of energy on the part of the interpreters. The speakers continue speaking in their primary language, while, at the same time, those listening hear the speakers in their own language, in their headset. The volume in the headset is deliberately set louder, but you can still hear the other language in the background. The original language does not disappear, while clear interpretation arrives in the primary language of the listener.

Before putting the headset on to hear what the Turkish or Kyrgyz or Thai delegates were saying, I would naturally wonder: What's going on? This is a question of translation – what words are people saying? Tell me what words in their own language translate to in my own language.

Once the headset was on my ears and the interpreter started speaking, my understanding began. When I could understand what people were saying, I then began to ask myself, "What does this mean?". This is the interpretation question. As the words were interpreted

and cultural meaning conveyed, I could start to get at the deeper question of meaning. The interpreter provided a starting point for my understanding, moving from knowing factually what was going on to understanding the meaning of what was said.

When I first walked into a room hearing numerous languages I didn't understand, I didn't know what was going on. When I put on the headset and the interpreter began to speak, I heard the panelists from Turkey talking about how they were addressing violence against women. I heard women from Kyrgyzstan and Thailand speak about their health needs after exposure to toxic farming chemicals. Because of the interpreter, I knew what was going on and began to grasp the meaning. And as I gathered with the Presbyterian UN office staff and the Christian women from around the world, we began to ask, in the context of our faith, "What does this mean?" What does this mean for the women involved? What does this mean in terms of God's presence in the world? What does this mean for our personal and church-wide responses? As we explored those questions, we interpreted the issues and root causes, but most importantly, we interpreted the issues in order to understand the *people* involved. We wanted to go beyond what *was going on* and dig deeper *into what it all meant*.

Translation asks, "What's going on?" Interpretation asks, "What does this mean?" What does this mean? The question that goes beyond the words

that are uttered and digs closer to the meaning, the implication of the words for real life, the understanding that is so important to our human relationships.

During the Jewish Festival of Weeks, the earliest followers of Christ gathered in Jerusalem, in a room, as they did many times after the resurrection, and now just after Jesus ascended into heaven. We find this group of mostly Galileans sequestering themselves from the people outside, who the book of Acts tells us are from all over the region, from many different backgrounds, all living in Jerusalem. The Festival of Weeks celebrates God's good gifts of the early harvest, so people are likely bringing their firstfruits to sacrifice in the temple and to share with the crowds gathering. So the people outside are preparing and giving out food from many different parts of the region, from many different cultures. With all that delicious food cooking and filling hungry bellies outside, the early Christians, despite having been sent out by the resurrected Christ several times, despite seeing Jesus ascend into heaven and leave them to the work he began, are hiding in a room, sequestered from the world to whom Christ sent them to befriend and share the good news.

What could possibly keep them in that room? The festival itself is familiar to them, part of their faith, part of their own culture. And yet they stay in a room, separate from everyone else. Could it be that they fear not understanding the people who speak different languages? Could it be that

they fear the discomfort they will feel as they encounter people who have interpreted the Festival of Weeks for *their* own culture? Could it be that they fear the power of God to bring them closer to people they once thought too foreign to befriend?

Enter the Holy Spirit. Like the rush of a mighty wind, she enters the room with words that take lips beyond speaking to actually communicate and ears beyond hearing to actually understand. Like a pair of headphones at the United Nations, in she appears as tongues of fire over the heads of the disciples, preparing them to share the Gospel in ways people of non-Galilean cultures could understand.

The diversity of language and culture and gender and social situation and age still exists, and joyfully so, but what happens here is that, by the power of the Holy Spirit's interpretation, those differences are no longer a barrier for people to receive the mighty acts of God. And what work is done here? What is going on? The Spirit is giving people the gift of understanding – they can understand what everyone is saying, despite language differences, despite national origin, despite culture. It is in the common understanding of what the prophet Joel spoke to the people long ago that they find their unity in diversity; the proof that the power of the Holy Spirit is real, that what is happening is indeed a set of almighty acts of God.

The moment the people outside asked, "What does this mean?", they began to understand. And the early Christians, who once sequestered themselves inside, are blown out into the streets, burned out of their own comfort, right into the confusion and chaos of intercultural worship and experience of the mighty acts of God. And thus those people once sequestered in that room also begin to experience God and understand God in ways they had never understood before. The Holy Spirit interprets God for them and for every culture, so no one can turn back and rebuild that Tower of Babel.

But some people, despite this enormous outpouring of God's Spirit, dismiss the event by saying the people who utter about God's deeds of power – and those for whom the Spirit is interpreting those deeds – are all drunk. They must be out of their minds to think that God would do something this disruptive and confusing and chaotic and uncomfortable.

People who dismiss something God is doing will make every attempt to dismiss an extraordinarily extravagant act of God by accusing people of doing something silly or even sinful, perhaps claiming that they are merely disguising it as God's work to get away with it.

When the Holy Spirit interprets something for us and brings a new understanding of God's word to us, it is easy to fall into this trap because the Holy Spirit rushes in to confuse what we once were sure about and thus

dismantle the towers of sameness and comfort we built in Babel. We thought we understood each other when we were simply translating things into our own language, but the Holy Spirit rushed in and confused us so that we might have to dig deeper to receive *Her* interpretation, true understanding of those around us.

You see, when the Holy Spirit interprets the mighty acts of God the believers were uttering in that upper room, all those standing outside of that room understood them in their own language, in their own culture. The Holy Spirit interprets the Gospel for their context. The Gospel is not just for the Galileans but for the whole world. It is to be interpreted in the beautifully diverse ways of every people of every nation. And that means that worship will look different, fellowship will look different, high holy days will look different, wherever the Gospel is present, because the Holy Spirit interprets the Gospel's meaning for each culture.

And that means we are sent beyond this place, beyond our comfort, beyond our own ways, to experience the mighty acts of God in other places and cultures, so that the Holy Spirit might interpret for us what God calls us to do, who God calls us to be, in our own place and culture.

Where does the Holy Spirit find you today? Does She find you in a room, sequestered from people who are different from you, desperately clinging to your own comfort in a world that is

increasingly confusing? Does She find you with the headphones on, ready to hear the interpretation, but not quite ready to join with those being interpreted. Does She find you ready to be a companion in Christ with those already celebrating in the streets and breaking bread with one another?

Or does She find you dismissing the mighty acts of God as drunkenness, dismissing *Her* interpretation as human babble, dismissing the mission of God, the sending of God, as impossible?

Does the Holy Spirit find you looking outside at the crowds gathered, hearing the interpretation of their languages, and wondering, "What's going on?" Does She find you going deeper to ask God, "What does this mean?"

No matter where we find ourselves, no matter what's going through our heads and what's on our hearts, the Spirit will find us. The Spirit will come into the room like flames, like a mighty wind, like an interpreter, ready to help us understand, ready to send us out. Are we ready to receive the mighty acts of God?