

# To Be Understood or to Understand

June 5, 2022

## Misunderstood

There's a game that I like to play with youth when I'm teaching them about the theology of social justice, and the pitfalls of social privilege. The idea of the game is to help the youth, who are often teens of privilege, to start to empathize with people who are different than they are, and to see that many of the difficulties that people face are not divinely ordained but rather are results of human constructs. My hope is to inspire them to realize that we can, and indeed our faith compels us, to address the vast disparities in the world if we are to live with integrity as people of faith.

The way the game works is that each teen gets a handful of playing cards, and is instructed to play the game of Go Fish. The twist is that each player is a stereotype of a character – a banker, a business person, a single parent, someone who is an English language learner, etc. Each has a bandana wrapped around their head, and stapled to the front of that bandana is a description of how to treat their character.

The players read the signs on the others' foreheads, and are instructed that when the person who is the single parent character asks if you have a card that they need, you should only give the card to them if they ask you twice. If the English language learner asks for a card, you are instructed to look at them and say, "What was that?" and then turn away. Of course, when the banker asks for a card, you give them what they ask for, and more. The person whose character is mentally ill wears a bandana with the instruction that all of the other characters are to just ignore them.

As you might imagine, the teens figure out pretty quickly that, by virtue of the rules, the deck is stacked for some and against others. It doesn't take long for the players like the banker to have more cards than they can hold on to, nor does it take very long for the players who are being ignored or misunderstood to give up or to start acting out.

The first time I was a participant in this game, I sat on the sidelines after a while, because being my character was just so hard. There was another time that I was playing this game with some teens when a couple of them took the initiative to behave as Robin Hoods, instead of watching the disparity grow. While their antics did ruin the example for the rest of the group, I have to say that I was proud of their creativity and willingness to do what they thought was right. One of them is a community organizer on a Native American Reservation now, the other is in the Peace Corps. No surprise – their roots in justice run pretty deep.

I share this game with you today as we celebrate Pentecost because it is an exercise in working to understand what divides us, what keeps the people of God from building the reign of God.

## Acts 2

Our New Testament lesson today takes place 50 days after Easter. The disciples are all gathered in one place. Many imagine that they're still in the upper room where Thomas touched the risen Christ's hands and side the day after Easter. Ten days earlier, they had seen Jesus ascend into the heavens on a cloud after he told them to wait for the Holy Spirit which would come to them not many days from now.

They're gathered together, waiting for the Holy Spirit, and they hear a sound like a tornado, flames appear among them and rest on them but don't consume them, and then we get to the part of today's passage where I'd like to spend our time today: they speak and all of the people gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, people from every corner of the Jewish world, are able to understand.

### **A Miracle of Speaking or a Miracle of Hearing?**

There's a gay, Chinese-American, Episcopal priest by the name of Eric Law who loves to process this passage with people when he's leading workshops on diversity in the church. He asks folks whether this is a miracle of speaking or a miracle of hearing? Most of the time, because he's presenting to pastors and scripture scholars, people scramble to look at the text again, try to engage our exegetical skills to see what he's trying to get at, but the text is ambiguous. It says that the disciples speak and those gathered hear.

Reverend Law then explains that, in his experience, people from a dominating culture usually say this is a miracle of speaking, that the disciples' being able to share a message in a way that all gathered can understand is what's miraculous. Conversely, people from Asian and other cultures in which collectivism is more highly valued tend to say this is a miracle of hearing, that the crowd being able to hear what the disciples are saying and understand is what's miraculous.

All of this may seem rather pedantic – who cares, really? Except, asking the question of whether Pentecost is a miracle of the mouth or a miracle of the ear really gets at is whether the person answering is more focused on being understood or understanding. That's where my prayer this week is leading me to draw your attention this week: which is your default – to seek to be understood or to seek to understand? I'll tell you that an overwhelming number of the couples who come to me for counseling, one, if not both parties, is so focused on being understood that understanding has lost its priority.

### **Conclusion**

Of course, it doesn't need to be an either/or answer. Indeed, the ambiguity of the scripture text lends itself to the interpretation that BOTH the speaking and the hearing are actions of the Holy Spirit. Many of you are familiar with the Prayer of St. Francis. We actually proclaimed it for all involved in the war in Ukraine as our Benediction throughout the season of Lent. The initial verses are so memorable:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow your love.

But as with all things that go on for very long (including sermons), people often miss the part that comes later. In the second stanza, we pray:

O divine master grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand. To be understood as to understand.

Friends, I'd like to suggest to you today that so many of our problems today that seem to be at an impasse, problems in our relationships, problems with gun violence and war and book banning, include a substantial focus on being understood and not enough of a commitment to working to

understand. I can't tell you how often, when I'm meeting with a couple, they'll appear to be listening. Each party may even make the appropriate head nods and affirming noises.

- "I hear you."
- "Sure, I can see that."
- "That makes sense."

And then, BAM! "But what you don't understand is..." and we're right back to square one. It's a commitment to my way, my perspective, my truth, my pride.

So, what if, instead of seeking to be understood this week, we would all set as our default, "Help me to understand." (And not in a sarcastic way, but to genuinely seek to understand.) Let's set as our default, "Help me to understand" in our relationships, in our prayer. "Help me to understand." And to draw on the Holy Spirit's energy as we do so.

I'm not suggesting that we all need to succumb to the dominating voices out there. No, far from it! Rather, I'm telling you that there's a subversive power, a Godly power, the power of the Holy Spirit which is stronger than any manifestation of might-makes-right, wrapped up in seeking to understand. Seeking to understand sets things off kilter. Seeking to understand admits that we don't have all of the answers. Most importantly, seeking to understand is transformative. It invites Holy Wisdom, Holy Courage, Holy Right Judgment, Holy Wonder into the mix.

My prayer this week is that the Holy Spirit, which is as present to us as the air we breathe, will unleash itself in your very being. May it burn in your very being, unleashing holy understanding, until not only you but the entire world is transformed by God's never-ending love.

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
**Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21**  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
June 5, 2022