



PENTECOST

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Lection - 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

I. Introduction

This is the day that the Spirit came
That the Spirit came
We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it
And be glad in it
This is the day that the Spirit came
We will rejoice and be glad in it
This is the day
This is the day

When the Spirit came¹

This is the day when the Spirit came. This day was Pentecost, the day of signs and wonders when the mighty wind of the Spirit gave birth to the Church. The images of Pentecost are abundant: the disciples and women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, huddled in the Upper Room; the violent sound of the wind; tongues of fire; sounds of languages other than those spoken in Galilee; the disbelieving observers; the newfound prophetic eloquence of Peter; and the birth of a community and movement such as the world had never seen.

Yet, the Spirit came that day not only to give life to the Church, the Spirit came bearing gifts with the intention of continuing to give life to this new creation. These gifts are listed in the Apostle Paul's body of Christ metaphors from 1 Corinthians 12:

- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Faith
- Healing
- Working of miracles
- Prophecy
- Discernment of spirits
- Various kinds of tongues
- The interpretation of tongues.

Paul emphasizes that God "activates all of these gifts in people" (1 Cor. 12:6b) and that the community of faith thrives when all of these gifts are used for its common good. Simply put, the more all of these gifts are used, the more vibrant, the more powerful, and the more Spirit-filled the Church.

My family church (St. Stephen Baptist Church in Washington DC, now Temple Hills, MD) did not strictly follow the Lectionary or Church calendar during my childhood. As a result, Pentecost was not observed. My first experience with Pentecost Sunday was in a Church of God in Christ near Florence, South Carolina. All the minister had to do was proclaim that it was Pentecost Sunday. When he did, Holy bedlam ensued. People shouted, ran throughout the sanctuary, and spoke in tongues as the Spirit gave utterance. There was no mention or emphasis of the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, prophecy, discernment of spirits, or the interpretation of tongues. And I have not heard this emphasis in my other experiences of Pentecost. Thus, this unit will focus on the diversity of gifts not traditionally emphasized relative to Pentecost, as these have been graciously given to our congregations by God to create, sustain, and strengthen the historical and prophetic witness of the Black church, in the past, now and in the future.

II. The Little Spoken of Gifts of the Spirit

(a) The Gift of Wisdom

Wisdom has an interesting definition in the Hebrew Bible. The root word *hokmah* meant dexterity and skill applicable in the military context in which the Israelites lived, but principally relating to the ability to live satisfactorily before God. Wisdom is personified in the First Testament as a woman, present with God at the beginning of Creation, to provide order and reason to benefit the course of Creation.² This personification is present in the Second Testament as the Greek word “Sophia.” However, in contrast to the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the wisdom literature based on experience, the apostle Paul speaks of God’s wisdom in 1 Corinthians 2:7 as something “secret and hidden” from the wisdom of the world. According to Paul, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor. 1:25) In this paradox, Paul presents wisdom as something not restricted to the sages and those considered wise by human standards. Recipients of wisdom are any to whom the Spirit chooses to give the gift. The amount of wisdom given to us by our ancestors and our people today is far too voluminous to explore in this unit, but a sample from the book In Our own Words: A Treasury of Quotations from the African-American Community speaks to the gift of wisdom of our people passed down to us so that we may live as wise people:

Every blessing you get from God is by faith.³

- Amanda Smith, 19th Century African American evangelist and author

An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.⁴

- African American folk saying

We were good Christians. And God never let us down.⁵

- Annie Elizabeth Delany

As a Christian I look at the world from the point of view of the Cross.⁶

- Cornel West

With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discord of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.⁷

- Martin Luther King, Jr., Minister, Activist, Nobel Peace Prize Winner

(b) The Gift of Knowledge

I suspect knowledge is not the first thing that comes to mind in our pulpits and pews when discussing gifts of the Spirit. Yet, perhaps it should be. Our churches receive gifts of words of knowledge from congregants with advanced degrees and those with “street smarts.” Knowledge, defined in the passage as *gnosis* in the Greek, speaks to the importance of intelligence and understanding, especially in relation to the course of faithful living and action of our congregations in our historical and current reality of institutional racism. The adage held true for our ancestors and holds true for our congregations today: Knowledge is power. And that power, Paul says, is a gift of the spirit for our churches.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) is known to many of us as one who believed in the power of knowledge. As founder of Bethune Cookman College, she blazed a path for education that benefits students to this day. However, fewer may know of the role the Spirit played in Mrs. Bethune's achievements. She attended a Presbyterian mission school at age eleven, won a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina, and attended Moody Bible Institute.⁸ Mary McLeod Bethune provides an indication of her understanding of the role the fruit of the Holy Spirit played in her work in the following excerpt from her "Last Will and Testament" published by Ebony Magazine in 1955, the year of her death.

***I LEAVE YOU LOVE.** Love builds. It is positive and helpful. It is more beneficial than hate. Injuries quickly forgotten quickly pass away. Personally and racially, our enemies must be forgiven. Our aim must be to create a world of fellowship and justice where no man's skin, color or religion, is held against him. "Love thy neighbor" is a precept which could transform the world if it were universally practiced. It connotes brotherhood and, to me, brotherhood of man is the noblest concept in all human relations. Loving your neighbor means being interracial, interreligious and international.⁹*

Amen to the legacy born of the Spirit of knowledge.

(c) The Gift of Faith

On the day of Pentecost our churches would do well to remember the gift of faith passed on to us by the apostolic traditions of the apostles and the early Church leaders. This gift, defined in Hebrews 11:1 as the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," has been bequeathed to our congregations through generations of our ancestors who were saved by faith and who believed in the hope of God through Jesus Christ. Our churches would not exist without the faith of our ancestors in faith: ministers, deacons, trustees, choir members, ushers, committee members, who worked tirelessly for a better day they believed by faith was sure to come.

I did not have to do any research to see the gift of faith in my own life. My faith was passed on to me by my parents, Deacons Freeman and Emma Palmer. That faith was passed on to them by their parents, Deacon and Mrs. Richmond (Fannie) Palmer and James and Elvetia Bridgeforth. I marveled at their faith, which gave them strength to live with dignity, grace, and courage through times of segregation as farmers in rural Virginia. The examples of their faith serve as models and inspiration to me today to live a life with courage and dignity. These excerpts from letters written by my maternal "grandma" Bridgeforth to my mother in 1983 speaks to this legacy of faith which is my gift:

Dearest Lena (my mother's middle and family name),

I got both of your letters today and was glad to hear from you, and glad that all is feeling fine. As for both of us we are thankful to God to be up and around. I am so thankful to be up and around....

I don't know much news. Brother Edmund's funeral will be at 2 o'clock tomorrow at Little Mount (Baptist Church in Blackstone VA). I do hope that his mother is feeling better. I know her and all the people knew him, as he went to Little Mount every time he could. He always went to other churches when he could to any programs and such. He just seemed to be interested in anything doing at church, so I hope that his soul is at rest and saved.

When she passed away in 1989, Mrs. Ozlin Taylor, who was both Grandma Bridgeforth's neighbor and employer (my grandparents were sharecroppers) said, "Ain't no question where she's gone." The gift of faith that I was blessed to receive is ours to cherish, ours to exercise, and ours to pass on.

(d) The Gift of Prophecy

Where would the historical and present African American church be without the gift of prophecy? Prophetic utterance has brought our congregations through slavery, disenfranchisement via Jim Crow laws, racial terrorism, and the Civil Rights era to this very day. One cannot easily estimate the value of this gift to our congregations. Contrary to popular secular and perhaps sacred belief, the prophet is not one who is called to foretell a far flung future. The word comes from the Greek "*prophetes*" and the Hebrew word "*nabi*," translated to mean, according to Bernhard Anderson, "one who speaks for another, especially a deity."¹⁰ Prophets in the First Testament interpreted the events of the present in light of God's plan, to communicate the message for that time, and to inspire the people to respond faithfully in light of their current situation.

Given that definition, the roll call of prophetic voices of African Americans is long indeed and they are not necessarily confined to the pulpit. My favorite prophetic voices include preachers such as Julia Foote, Howard Thurman, Gardner Taylor, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornell West, but they also include persons who are not preachers such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Marian Wright Edelman, and President Barack Obama. These are voices gifted by the Spirit with the ability to interpret the present time in light of God's plan and reign.

Although not named above, I count myself especially blessed to have had the opportunity to hear preaching by one of my favorite prophets every Sunday. I joined the Riverside church and was ordained to ministry there during the eighteen year tenure of Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. He continues to be a prophetic voice in this time through his Healing of the Nations Foundation, which serves to promote the spiritual healing and revitalization of America. Below is an excerpt from a prayer Dr. Forbes delivered when Riverside celebrated the life of preacher and prophet Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1990:

Because our needs are so great today, and your care so constant, we know that you are rebuilding the network of compassion around new visionaries who you have assembled for this hour. Surprise us with the discovery of how much power we have to make a difference in our day:

- *A difference in the way citizens, meet, greet, respect and protect the rights of each other*
- *A difference in the breadth of our vision of what is possible in humanization, reconciliation, and equalization of results in our great city*
- *A difference in the way government, business, and labor can work together for justice and social enrichment*
- *A difference in our response to the needy, and a difference in our appreciation for those who give of themselves for the surviving and thriving of our beautiful people*

Use this season of celebration to spark new hope and stir up our passion for new possibilities. Make compassion and the spirit of sacrifice to be the new mark of affluence of character. Strengthen us to face reality and to withstand the rigor of tough times in the anticipation of a bright side beyond the struggle. Inspire, empower, and sustain us until we reach the mountaintop, and see that future for which our hearts yearn. This is our fervent and sincere prayer. Amen.¹¹

These words, twenty years later, are still prophetic for our times. This reflects the sustaining power of the prophetic word for our churches that is a gift of Pentecost.

(e) The Gift of Discernment

The word “discerning” comes from the Greek word “diakrisis,” which means distinguishing or judging. However, according to Strong’s Concordance, the purpose of the discerning process is not for the purpose of passing judgment on opinions, as to which one is to be preferred or more correct.¹² This is an important distinction for our congregations with respect to this spiritual gift, particularly as it relates to our history. African Americans used this gift to distinguish the will of God for our people relative to the decisions of humans regarding dehumanization based on race. It was that discernment that called the faith of our people to action concerning the will of God for us. Examples of this abound in our history, with people such as Richard Allen, Harriett Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Charles Mason, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Desmond Tutu. Discernment is a spiritual gift that has been, and is, a benefit to our individual lives in relation to the will of God. It has been an immense gift to our corporate lives and the church as well.

The importance of discernment as a spiritual gift is provided in the following reflection by Rev. Kenneth Samuels. He is pastor of Victory for the World Church, a United Church of Christ Congregation in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Based on the passage in Mark 7 where Jesus is questioned by the religious authorities about the disciples eating with unwashed hands, Rev. Samuels offers the following excerpts from his reflection:

“Majoring in the Minors”

In religious circles, it is not unusual to confuse and conflate conventional traditions with eternal truth. But the danger in elevating human convention to the level of divine commandment is that the convention often obscures and diminishes

the commandment. Consequently, we end up majoring in what is minor (temporal traditions), and missing what's major: eternal truth....

...Many religious people make the same mistake today. Some of us are more concerned with school prayer in Jesus' name than we are with quality education for all in the name of equal opportunity. Some of us are more concerned with the Ten Commandments being posted on the wall of the courthouse than we are with impartial justice within the courthouse. Some of us are more concerned with condemning gay couples than we are with providing loving homes to the thousands of foster children whom gay couples could adopt, if given the opportunity.

The real consequence of majoring in conventions and missing the commandments is that while we uphold religious protocol, people suffer and even die through neglect of the essential commandments of God.

Prayer

Lord God, please give us discernment, so that our traditions will not continue to obscure your truth. Amen.¹³

Reverend Samuels illustrates the importance of discerning spirits, past, present, and future for our congregations.

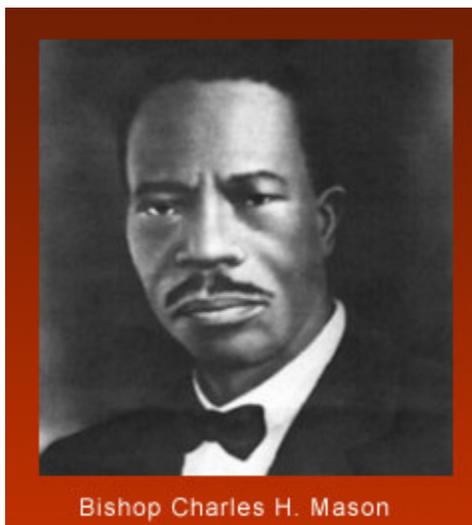
(f) The Gifts of Tongues and the Interpretation of Tongues

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is a gift both experienced and emphasized in many of our churches as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is also a one with a long and controversial history. While evident during the time of the apostles, according to Cleon Rogers, writings of the early church fathers such as Polycarp, St. Clement, and St. Ignatius do not speak of the existence and use of this gift during the post apostolic period from 100-400 CE.¹⁴ Rogers concluded that “even if the gift was in existence, in spite of all the testimony to the contrary, it was neither widespread nor the normal Christian experience.” By the medieval periods, church leaders had in fact declared that glossolalia was no longer possible, and speaking in tongues was denounced as either heresy or demon possession.



Rev. William J. Seymour

Interestingly enough, glossolalia emerged as a result of the Reformation and the religious freedom subsequently afforded in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. There are accounts of glossolalia ranging from the United Methodist and Moravian churches to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) during this period. The best documented arrival of this gift to our African American congregations was the Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909). William Joseph Seymour, who presided over the revival, is called the “father of Pentecostalism.” Born in Louisiana in 1870, Seymour attended a segregated Baptist church in his childhood years. He became a Baptist minister in his twenties, but became acquainted with the holiness movement when he moved to Cincinnati at age 30. A three year stay in Texas was a pivotal time in Seymour’s life; he attended a school and accepted the holiness teachings of Charles Fox Parham. During this time, he accepted tenets of Parham’s doctrine, which included baptism of the Holy Spirit through the speaking of tongues. This gift was very present during Seymour’s ministry on Azusa Street, where people came from near and far to the services.



Bishop Charles H. Mason

One of those who came was Charles H. Mason. He had already founded the Church of God in Christ several years before, but was skeptical of this gift prior to his visit to Azusa. In his mind, “I interpreted the speaking in tongues to mean that we left off blaspheming, etc.” But after his visit, he believed that “that the only reason we were not enjoying the speaking in tongues was because we did not accept it.” Below is an excerpt of his own account of receiving the gift of tongues as he opened himself to the Spirit:

As I arose from the altar and took my seat, I fixed my eyes on Jesus, and the Holy Ghost took charge of me. I surrendered perfectly to Him and consented to Him. Then I began singing a song in unknown tongues, and it was the sweetest thing to have Him sing that song through me. He had complete charge of me. I let Him have my mouth and everything. After that it seemed I was standing at the cross and heard Him as He groaned, the dying groans of Jesus, and I groaned. It was not my voice but the voice of my Beloved that I heard in me. When we got through with that, He started the singing again in unknown tongues. When the singing stopped I felt that complete death, it was my life going out, but it was complete death to me. When He had finished this, I let Him hold my hands up, and they rested just as easily up as down. Then He turned on the joy of it.¹⁵

Mason’s experience was a pivotal moment in relation to the experience of glossolalia in African American churches. Today, the Church of God in Christ he founded, other Pentecostal and Holiness denominations in our tradition, Baptist, AME, and even Catholic congregations believe in the existence and importance of tongues as a spiritual gift.

An account of the Azusa Revival DVD may also be purchased through www.VisionVideo.com.

The importance and miraculous nature of glossolalia as a spiritual gift, and the interpretation of tongues cannot be minimized. The interpretation of tongues is closely associated with prophecy in that the interpretation, which is not a literal translation, is spoken forth as a word to the whole of the congregation. This is based on the writings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, where he emphasizes that it is through the interpretation of tongues that the whole body of Christ is “built up.” After providing an analogy speaking to the engagement of mind and spirit as it relates to interpretation of tongues, Paul advises that “if anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God.” (1 Cor. 14:27-28) The gift of tongues is bestowed by the Spirit to an individual. The gift of interpretation is one that edifies the church as a whole. The importance and use of this gift, although dependent on the individual gift, is both vital and viable for the building of our churches.

III. Images of the Spirit

1. There are many gospel songs which speak of the gift of healing. One of my favorites is a song by long-time gospel artist, Richard Smallwood. His song, “Healing,” declares “there is a Balm in Gilead to heal the soul.”

Healing

Don't be discouraged
Joy comes in the morning
Know that God is nigh
Stand still and look up
God is going to show up
He is standing by
(Repeat)

CHORUS

There's healing for your sorrow
Healing for your pain
Healing for your spirit
There's shelter from the rain
Lord send the healing
For this we know
There is a balm in Gilead
For there's a balm in Gilead
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the soul.

REPEAT CHORUS

There is a balm in Gilead
For there's a balm in Gilead
(5X)
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the soul
Healing for the soul (Repeat)

2. In the Hand of the Holy Spirit is the account of the life and work of artist J.B. Murray (1908-1988). A farm worker from Glascock County, Georgia who could neither read nor write, he began to paint at age seventy inspired by the Holy Spirit. By the time of his death, his art had been shown nationally and internationally.
3. Miracles can come in many forms. Miracle's Boys is a dramatic series broadcast in 2005 by Nickelodeon. Based on the book by Jacqueline Woodson and directed by Bill Duke and Spike Lee, it tells the story of three orphaned brothers in Harlem and their struggle to keep their family together. Their ability to do so given their circumstances is miraculous.

IV. The Importance of These Gifts

This unit is being prepared as the Christmas holiday approaches and my consciousness is raised about gifts as the time of gift giving draws near. I prefer giving gifts that: 1) people can use; and 2) have a lasting impact. God has given the gifts of the Spirit to our

congregations to sustain our faith and our spiritual being during historical and present day institutional racism. The gifts of healing, miracles and tongues are important to our churches. But so are the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, prophecy, discernment, and the interpretation of tongues. Paul makes no differentiation in the importance of these gifts as evidence of the Spirit. Pentecost, present and future, relies of the exercise of all these gifts to make our churches powerful instruments for individual and social spiritual transformation

V. Cultural Resources for Reading and Further Study

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- Peterson, Willie O. "The Spirit in the Black Church." Bible.org. Online location: <http://bible.org/seriespage/spirit-black-church> accessed 12 December 2010
- Hinson, Glenn. Fire in my Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Bana, George and Jackson, Harry. High Impact African American Churches. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2004.

Notes

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2. Anderson, Bernhard. Understanding the Old Testament. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986. p. 568.
3. Dinwiddie, Boyd. In Our Own Words: A Treasury of Quotations from the African-American Community. New York, NY: Avon Books, 1996. p. 291.
4. Ibid., p. 32.
5. Ibid., p. 300.
6. Ibid., p. 295.
7. Ibid., p. 292.
8. Mary McLeod Bethune Biography Resource Center, Gale Group 2001. Online location: http://www.africawithin.com/bios/mary_bethune.htm accessed 12 December 2009
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11. Washington, James. Conversations with God: Two Centuries of African-American Prayers. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1995. pp. 260-261.

12. Strong, James. The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990. p. 1253.
13. Samuels, Kenneth. "Majoring in the Minors." UCC Still Speaking Devotional 2 September 2009. Online location: www.dailydevotional@ucc.org accessed 12 December 2009
14. Rogers, C. L. "The Gift of Tongues in the Post Apostolic Church." Originally published in Biblio Sacra, Dallas Theological Seminary. Online location: http://www.crownhillchurch.com/The_Gift_of_Tongues_in_the_Post_Apostolic_Church.pdf accessed 12 December 2009
15. "Charles H. Mason Testimony." Online location: <http://www.azusastreet.org/AzusaStreetMason.htm> accessed 12 December 2009
16. Ibid.