

Pentecost in a Podcast (Acts 2.1-21)
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The day of Pentecost had come, and they were all together in one place. Suddenly, there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house...and there appeared to them flames like tongues of fire distributed among them and coming to rest on each one.

The voices come straight to my computer. I don't have to do anything to find them, having subscribed to the free podcast, which is a radio program that my laptop automatically downloads each week. They just find me, these voices. It started out simply enough and I can tell you exactly when. It was the middle of June last year and I was working on a sermon about Wangari Maathai, the tree-planting Nobel Peace Prize winner from Kenya. I had read a lot about Wangari but was sure I wouldn't begin to understand unless I could hear her story in her own voice. So I searched the web for audio files and came up with it. A curious little program started by Minnesota Public Radio called "Speaking of Faith." The particular program that I downloaded in June contained an hour-long interview with Wangari Maathai, just what I needed to give a bit of life to the sermon I was working on. What I hadn't counted on was that the process might lead to the development of a new ritual in my own life, a ritual that, through its many voices, has helped to restore my faith in what is possible when we each tell our truths and share what we have found to be sacred along the way.

My ritual follows the same basic pattern each week. At some point every seven days my computer downloads the radio show "Speaking of Faith." I am usually not paying attention to this transaction as I answer e-mails or read the morning paper online. A day or two later I take notice that a new show or "podcast" is available. I never really know who the guest will be, but the host, a woman named Krista Tippett, is always the same.

Krista herself is an interesting study. She grew up the granddaughter of a Southern Baptist preacher in Oklahoma, deeply rooted in an evangelical Christian worldview. Later she went to college and gave up religion altogether, committing herself with equal zeal to politics because she believed that politics, not religion, could actually change the world. After working in Western Europe in the political realm for many years, Krista sort of burned out, went to an island off the coast of Spain to write, and turned into something of a contemplative there. Then she returned to the U.S., followed her questions rather surprisingly to Yale Divinity School and then, even more surprisingly, into life as a public radio host talking with people from every religious tradition and no religious tradition about how they do or don't understand God, where they ground their own kinds of faith, what questions are ultimately meaningful to them, and how all of these things invite them to live.

Krista Tippett has found an astonishing array of people to sit with and listen to, and, in order to give you just a hint of the variety of religious and spiritual experiences on offer each week, I'll mention just a few of her programs. Recent "Speaking of Faith" podcasts have included an Eastern Orthodox Christian theologian discussing the spiritual practice of gardening, a white theologian and a black psychologist considering the legacy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a Hindu physicist offering that questions of science and religion complement each other in our search for meaning, a Lakota healer teaching about the intersection of wisdom between indigenous spiritual practices and twelve-step recovery programs, and a dialogue between a Palestinian and an Israeli who have each suffered the death of a family member and found in their losses a shared commitment to work for lasting peace. The power in each of these stories, of course, is

that we are able to hear different sisters and brothers in their own voices speaking about what is truly sacred to them. It has become one of the more edifying rituals in my week. More often than not, on my day off, I'll hook up the podcast to a set of speakers in our home, press "Play," and listen to the opening jingle from American Public Media as I get out the broom to sweep the floor or fill the sink with warm, soapy water to wash the dishes. And as I shuffle around the house tidying up, listening to the podcast, I find myself suddenly transported into the world of an excited scientist or a mystical Buddhist or a passionate activist, which is to say, I find myself transported into a deeper experience of this world, the world that I share with so many different voices.

At this sound a crowd of them gathered, and were bewildered because each one heard her own language spoken; they were amazed and in astonishment exclaimed, "Surely these people who are speaking are all Galileans! How is it that each of us can hear them in her own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites; inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judea and Cappodocia, of Pontus and Asia... visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; Cretans and Arabs – all of us hear them telling in our own tongues what great things God has done." They were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What can this mean?"

The mention of many different voices almost always prompts the question, "What can this mean?" It is, in essence, the question of pluralism, a question that applies not only to life in our country with its tradition of free religious expression but also to the larger life in our increasingly connected global community. Now, more than ever before, we have the chance to hear from people of every religious stripe across the globe. But along with this chance come not only the wonders of pluralism but its perils. For just as easily as I can find a delightful public radio show with two clicks at the computer, someone else can find an exhortation to do violence against an occupying army or a local Planned Parenthood office. And this tension really does beg the question, "What can this mean?" The first step toward an answer, I think, may simply be to acknowledge that religious

voices are used for every kind of purpose and they are now broadcast around the world with increasing ease. We could follow this step with another by considering that our part of our own faith, then, in this increasingly connected world, is asking together what constitutes a healthy religious practice, what makes for a compassionate spirituality, and with whom we might partner in order to repair some of the damage done in our world. These are precisely the sorts of questions that Krista Tippett asks her guests and her listeners every week. And the more she asks them, the more she seems to get at something quite deep.

The “Speaking of Faith” radio show is well aware of the terrible ways religion has been and continues to be used. But in spite of this, perhaps even because of this, the show has taken as its mission the raising of religious voices that are deeply humanistic, peaceable, curious, and poetic. Into a world that so very often understands people and traditions to be at odds with one another, the show continually offers a middle path, a rather wide space for dialogue that demonstrates how much we really do have in common. Indeed, the more I have listened to the show, the harder it has become for me to believe that the voices of violence and intolerance are the primary voices of religion. I still know those voices are out there, and sometimes they strike me as the loudest voices. I hear them every week. I read about their results. I even lose some sleep over them. But one thing that has come to help me now is the weekly ritual of listening to a podcast where people very different than me speak in voices that are very similar to my own. From every country and culture, from every tradition and discipline, they speak of their experience of the sacred, their hope for the future, and their longing to live in peace. And Krista Tippett fills her show with people who get out of bed every morning and choose

the kind of faith they will live in spite of the fact that the days are short and there is much to be done. It isn't uncommon that I find myself at the end of the show like the characters from our old Pentecost story, "amazed and perplexed," asking myself what the whole thing might mean for my own life. How am I to live my own religious tradition with integrity and compassion while honoring the traditions of others and finding common cause together?

In the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your young people shall see visions and your old people shall dream dreams. Yes, on my servants...I will pour out my Spirit in those days...[and then] Everyone who calls on the name of [God], [Everyone who calls on the name of the sacred], shall be saved.

One of my own responses to the question of pluralism is that I identify myself as a Christian Universalist. I don't personally believe in a God who shall one day judge all people and condemn selected groups based on their religious tradition. I believe that there are many paths to truth and many ways to know and to talk about what is sacred among us. My way is that of liberal Christianity, but it has been continually informed and enriched by friends and colleges from many other traditions or from no particular tradition at all. And while my Christian Universalism shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who has listened to my proclamations, what might come as a surprise is its location within our own tradition. For there have been baptist Universalists for nearly as long as there have been baptists in America, with early records of their sermons dating to the 18th Century. And if we were to trace our European forbears, we'd find a Universalist streak going back even farther. The point of mentioning this is to say that it is very possible for us to be rooted in our own tradition while also acknowledging that the sacred is much larger than our particular claim on it. It is very possible for us to talk about the

path we are on and also be open to the paths of others who are our neighbors and partners in the world. It is very possible for us to talk about the teachings of Jesus and also feel great reverence for the teachings Lao-Tzu, Buddha, Moses, and Muhammad. And it is very possible for us to enter into a spirit of genuine dialogue, which might just be the spirit our own sacred stories say was present at Pentecost, the spirit that allows us each speak in our different voices and still find some common, even holy, ground.

Week after week, as I listen to the voices of people from so many different perspectives on the “Speaking of Faith” podcast, I come away nourished by the spirit of the show. It is, I think, the spirit of something close to a universal religious impulse – to ask deep questions, to listen to real stories, to join heart with mind, to articulate the senses of wonder and reverence, and to work to repair what is broken in ourselves and our world. And on this Day of Pentecost, my rather simple hope is that we would each find a few new ways to open ourselves to the rich diversity of voices in our world, listening for some spirit that we might share. My simple hope is that we would each listen to a podcast on our computers. That we would each spend time with a person whose experience is unlike our own. That we would each listen to the sacred stories of another tradition. That we would each walk through a different neighborhood. That we would each ask someone else what is most meaningful to them. That we would each move through the days “amazed and perplexed” asking not only ourselves, but all of our sisters and brothers “What does this mean?”

According to our sacred stories, the spirit that is holy can be found in the voices of the many. Our work, then, is to enter the conversation and to listen for it.

May it be so.

(The “Speaking of Faith” podcast is available for free download to PC or Mac users, but it requires the iTunes program. See <http://www.speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/> for a site that includes detailed instructions on how to begin podcasting. A discussion of early baptist Universalists, including John Murry and Elhanan Winchester, can be found in Charles Howe’s book *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*.)