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Cari Myers
cmyers@iliff.edu

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Hearing Differently

Cari Myers

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. (Acts 2.1–6)

Celebrations of the Day of Pentecost often recognize the gift of tongues only as a miracle of speech, but we need to realize that it also represents a miracle of hearing. In the early days of the Christian church, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the power to speak in different languages to communicate the word of God. This gift of speaking is action-oriented; it involves giving out words and information in other tongues. However, at the same time, the Holy Spirit is also granting the gift of hearing. This gift is more passive, and involves listening, receiving, and understanding information.

Traditionally, those in power have used the gift of tongues and the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, the gift of the ear. Eric Law posits that white, upper/middle class (the powerful) particularly need the gift of the ear as this is against the instinct of the powerful that prefer to act, control, and command. They should attempt to merely *be*, listening and learning, instead of doing: “If the church is to move toward supporting the communities of people of color to come forth and exercise the miracle of the tongue and speak of the mighty works of God,” those who have been oppressed and voiceless should now be heard. “It is essential that the two approaches be taken together so that those in power and the powerless can meet in the middle where they can interact on equal ground.”¹

The work of ethnography and cultural study is one way the church can practice hearing differently, engaging the world around us through the power of narrative to help us see where we are; who we are and who we are not, and how we feel about that; who we tend to draw and attract and who we don't; whose voices are loudest and whose voices are silent. If we can listen differently, we can examine our orthopraxis and how it is representing our orthodoxy.

Ethnography and cultural studies are conversations with our larger community and provide a different means to hear the world around us uninterrupted, engaging our communities in speaking for themselves, and listening to people tell their own stories and communicate their own needs and desires and wishes and dreams without our interpretation. Those who have spoken may hear, and those who have been silent may speak.

In the academy, ethnography is a scientific method of examining human cultures and draws from a variety of fields ranging from social work to anthropology to religious studies to history. Cultural study investigates the ways culture impacts the self-understanding and social navigation of groups and individuals, as well as

1. Eric Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 49.

the ways different cultures interact and affect one another. Cultural study can be both formal and informal; in the case of local churches engaging their surrounding communities, cultural study begins with the individual in order to become the practice of a community. Despite its academic roots, which can often be stuffy and rigid, ethnography and cultural study both value the power of narrative and personal experience to uncover great truths and describe shared experiences.

An Informal Case Study: When the Christian Hears Differently

My first experience in immersive cultural study took place well into my adulthood. I was fortunate to have spent my youth traveling to other cities and countries on mission trips, examining foreign cultures academically with an eye toward evangelism. We would learn a few words of the language, study some of the major features of the location and inhabitants, speak with someone who used to live there or had visited before, go for a few weeks, and return home. I also lived overseas during college for a year. But I lived with a group of Americans and we attended classes together in English in our own school, traveled together, worshipped, and studied together—and so my personal contact with citizens of that country was minimized.

While these experiences were wonderful and life-changing, it wasn't until I entered the public school system in Texas as a seventh-grade English language arts teacher that I believe I really began to understand informal cultural study. Because this was no foreign country or distant city I was visiting—this was my home. Previously, I understood cultural study only at a distance, as something temporary I would briefly experience with a specific agenda and then leave. While those travels were powerful and transformative, they were not a daily experience of adjustment, and I usually approached the immersion with the intention of teaching and speaking rather than listening and learning.

When I became a teacher, my students represented a different demographic than the one I represented, and I began to see them in every aspect of my life—at the mall, movies, and restaurants; as I was driving; everywhere . . . with one exception. I never saw any of my students at my church. Even though my church was very close to my school and they all knew about my church, none of them attended. A few of them had visited, and they thought our game room and concession stand were awesome, yet they never returned. I was deeply troubled by this, and asked them why they stayed away. Was it a denominational difference? Were people unfriendly? Was it too hard to find a ride? None of these were the answer. They just felt uncomfortable: “No one there looked like me.”

So I began to study two cultures—the culture of my students and my own. Over time, as I listened to the stories and life experiences of my students, I began to hear my own culture with new ears. At first I was very defensive of my people and myself—none of us wanted to be a part of hurting people! But it was unconscious and subcutaneous but ubiquitous: we didn't mean to do it but we did. I could hear the insider language, I could hear how our concerns and worries sounded to them, I could hear distinct differences in the things that kept us up at night and gave us anxiety, and I could hear how our perception of people like my students sounded to them. They were very intuitive and could hear and sense the way my people reacted when they walked in the building. They saw us glancing over, they heard our murmurs, and they saw our clothes and cars and phones. They understood *different*.

I learned that the first step in cultural study is to examine myself. When I begin to feel myself becoming defensive or anxious, I should not leap to my own defense but examine my own reaction. I must question why I am reacting this way, why I am feeling what I'm feeling, and what it might mean. This is so much harder than it sounds, because in my experience, this meant I had to face the fact that I had grown up with and surrounded myself mostly with people who were exactly like me. I don't want this to sound as though I made the conscious decision to do this; it was thrust upon me every day when I stepped into my classroom. I could not escape it. My life was very comfortable, my concerns and problems were the same as those around me, and I had the luxury of not having to worry over concerns and problems of people who were not a white, middle-class, Christian woman.

This self-examination led to the second step in cultural study for me: location. I was forced to locate myself, to recognize and claim my own context and history, and examine it in the light of the privileges I

enjoyed and the power I unconsciously held. I saw that the way I was welcomed when I walked into a store or a bank and the way I was treated when I was pulled over for speeding was often very different than the way the parents of my students were welcomed and treated. It really was. I didn't want to see this, I didn't want it to be true, but after enough occurrences I couldn't help but ask why.

Finally, I realized I needed to be educated. I wanted to learn from my students, to better understand why our shared city felt so different to us. I had to give myself permission to make mistakes, to admit that while I fumbled around in this new context I would probably say something offensive or ignorant, and to ask them for forgiveness in advance when I couldn't say their names correctly or when I had to ask them who their favorite celebrities or musicians or athletes were. They knew all of mine (except for the older ones), but I knew so few of theirs. They had to be conversant in two cultures: their culture and the dominant culture. It really was only fair that I attempt to return the favor.

A Church That Hears Differently

These are not steps for an institution to take—these are for individuals. Although it would be a beautiful thing if an entire community decided to travel this road together, and I believe it would be well worth our while. Because when we (a collective of individuals making a conscious, intentional choice) approach our communities in this posture, we become:

- A humble(d) church. Cultural study can serve as an act of humility. A humble church agrees to not approach its surrounding community and larger culture assuming we have already perceived, understood, and prepared to meet their needs. We are silent and listen first, allowing our neighbors to name their own needs and desires within the context of their lived experience, and then we ask what we can do.
- A teachable church. Cultural study opens the door for us to learn from our larger community. When we are a teachable church, we are released from our self-assigned and self-assumed roles of fixing and changing. When we become a listening and teachable church, our function within our larger community transforms and our missions becomes more specific and personal.
- An uncomfortable church. Of course, a church in this position is vulnerable. When we are willing to openly listen to the lived experience of others, we open ourselves to a potential confrontation with our own prejudices and assumptions about people. A church willing to get uncomfortable will embrace the possibility that we will have to examine ourselves and who we are, who we think we are, and how we are seen by our communities. We willingly sacrifice our own comfort to welcome others into our sanctuaries, admitting that we are and have been ignorant about much of the world around us. We admit that we have enjoyed the luxury of not having to address many cultural events and issues because we don't have to. This time is quickly passing! We no longer have the luxury of not engaging these issues because they dominate the 24-hour news cycle, our Twitter feeds, and our timelines! We can't afford to ignore these cultural moments any longer (because our youth are following these issues out the doors of our churches) so let us embrace them willingly with fear and trembling, willing to get uncomfortable.
- A neighborly church. In addition to listening differently in order to provide missionally, we witness the lives of others and show that we give them value by honoring their lived experience. When our goal is not always to find a solution to a problem but to attempt to understand the lives of our neighbors, we show and practice neighbor love in a deeply personal way.
- A serving church. While canned food drives and school supply donations are crucial and meet the needs of our communities, these acts of service do not ask why these needs exist. Cultural study asks why and examines inequalities, injustice, and suffering through a larger systemic lens.

Ethnography and cultural study provide an authentic, egalitarian way to engage our communities and reevaluate our mission and purpose in our larger culture. They also provide an avenue for us to examine

ourselves: our context, priorities, and privileges. Before a church may seek to missionally engage its community, the members of that church must first examine themselves, lay themselves aside in the spirit of neighbor love, and seek out the voices of the communities around them. Those of us who have traditionally exercised the gift of the tongue must exercise the gift of the ear, so that those who have been silenced may speak, and those who have ears may hear differently.

CARI MYERS IS STUDYING RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE JOINT PhD PROGRAM AT THE ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER. HER WORK RESIDES AT THE CROSSROADS OF SOCIAL ETHICS, POSTCOLONIAL THEORY, LATINO/A STUDIES, ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT, AND PUBLIC EDUCATION. CARI'S DISSERTATION WILL FOCUS ON THE WAYS LATINO/A YOUTH NEGOTIATE LIFE ON THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER, ESPECIALLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COLONIZED CLASSROOM AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH. OF PARTICULAR INTEREST TO HER ARE THE SURVIVAL NARRATIVES LATINO/A YOUTH RECEIVE ABOUT HOW TO SURVIVE AND SUCCEED IN THE UNITED STATES (CMYERS@ILIFF.EDU).

