Waiting for the Call

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Prologue:
Tongues of Fire

It’s Pentecost, June 8, 2003. The front of our sanctuary, in commemoration of this particular day in the life of the Christian church, is swathed in red. A rich red cloth drapes the altar, puddling onto the floor. Red ribbons wind in and out of the bricks that form a rough-hewn cross over the altar. Extravagant bouquets of red flowers bedeck the altar and the podium. Much of the congregation wears red, too. Red shirts, red shoes, red dresses, red scarves, every possible shade of red flashes from each corner of the sanctuary.

Pentecost, in the Christian calendar, falls fifty days after Easter. Told in the book of Acts, the story of Pentecost is in some ways the story of the birth of the Christian church. Seven weeks had passed since Jesus’ resurrection. On Pentecost, we are told, the early Christians were “all with one accord in one place.” Suddenly, there was the sound of a “rushing mighty wind” and tongues of fire descended on the heads of the apostles in an outrageous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Thus filled with the spirit, these early believers began to speak “with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” Amazingly, the crowd that gathered in Jerusalem on that day heard the apostles speaking as if in the native language of the listeners.
There are several improbable features to this story. Who can believe in literal tongues of fire resting atop the heads of those early Christians anyway? Or in the capacity to hear a language other than the one being spoken? But notice, our pastor tells us, how extravagantly God arrives in our lives and how willing this God is to celebrate diversity, to meet the listener in his or her home language. The red that flashes through our sanctuary is a reminder of those red tongues of fire descending, of God arriving in a manner both lavish and unexpected. Whatever one might make of this, there is no denying that red is a wonderful color for fire, for life, for celebration.

For Carol and me, it is a momentous day, not because of Pentecost but because our older daughter, Lucy, after three years of study and preparation, is about to be baptized and confirmed. Dressed in a bright red, short-sleeved sweater, a short black skirt, and black heels, she holds in her palm the outline of the speech she has prepared, the one that will tell us why she has decided to join Broadway United Methodist Church. We have no idea what the speech says, because she wants to surprise us, but she insists that she is ready.

Our two pastors, Greg and Vernice, call Lucy, and us—her two moms—and her sister Gracie to the front for the ritual of baptism. When the liturgy (the words of the ritual exchanged between pastors, members of the congregation, and our daughter) is completed and Greg has placed a handful of water on Lucy’s head, it is time for her speech. We return to our front-row seats, and I feel the familiar jolt of adrenaline that always pumps through me when either of the girls faces a special challenge.

Lucy, at fourteen, stands four feet ten inches in heels, just tall enough to peer over the lectern as she addresses the congregation. A Peruvian adoptee, she has the shiny black hair and bronze skin of the Quechua people who are her biological kin. She faces the room and pauses, collecting herself, a small, but commanding, presence.

“Some of you know that my Grandaddy is a Baptist preacher,” she begins. “When I was little, I thought he knew everything there was to know about God and the Bible. He was always giving us presents to help us learn more about the Bible. Bible storybooks and games. Bible puzzles. He even gave us a video of the entire book of Matthew.”

I’m moved that she would begin her description of her developing faith by mentioning my father. And yes, a four-hour video containing the
entire text of the first gospel was his idea of a great gift for the grandkids. The fellow who played Jesus in the video was pale, with light brown hair and a relentless, almost silly, cheerfulness. The first hour of the video graphically depicted the slaughter of the innocents, after which Lucy and Gracie never had the stomach to watch the remaining three hours.

“One year he gave us a game called Bible Trivia,” Lucy continues. “Whoever got the most right answers could advance to Heavenly Knowledge. He knew so much about the Bible, I figured we didn’t have a chance. I was so surprised when he got a couple of answers wrong and Gracie made a couple of lucky guesses and jumped all the way up to Heavenly Knowledge before him.”

Everyone laughs. The audience is right with her. Carol and I exchange a look of immense pleasure and pride. That’s our girl. That’s our Lucy.

“Since I’ve been in confirmation class and studied with Greg, I’ve learned so much more about God and the Bible than I ever knew before.”

Members of our church can fill in the unstated connection here. They know Greg’s approach to Bible study is less literal and more interpretive than what would likely come from a Baptist preacher.

“I used to wonder what God was like. When I was little I thought, what is God, a big blob up in the sky? Then, in sixth grade, I learned about the Holocaust, and I wondered how God could let such a thing happen. Was God there? Now, studying with Greg, I’ve come to understand that God is there, but it is up to all of us to do God’s work in the world.”

In the next section of the speech, Lucy begins to explain why she has decided to join our church. Her eyes shine with feeling as she speaks about the tremendous amount of work people do on various committees, the gorgeous decorations the environment team produces for each Sunday’s worship. She knows those committees well, having participated in several of them during her three years of confirmation preparation. She mentions the preaching, the beautiful music, the diversity of our congregation. “I love you guys,” she says, “you guys are great.”

“Most of all,” she says, “I want to be a part of this church because it is a place where,” she fights back hard on her tears, “both of my moms are welcome.” The emotion in her voice spills over and now she is openly weeping. I want to leap from my seat right then and wrap her in my arms.
Our church, located in the heart of what Chicagoans know as Boys Town and with a membership that is between 30 and 40 percent gay, has spent the last several years openly engaged in a struggle with the national United Methodist denomination for a more inclusive church. In the pews each Sunday sit a couple of hundred folks who have fought hard to create a welcoming space for gay Christians and dozens who have experienced rejection from the churches in which they grew up. For such a congregation, it is intensely powerful to witness a teenager pouring her heart out about how deeply she appreciates the welcome they extend each Sunday.

She is crying hard now, her shoulders shaking. Everyone in the congregation seems to be sobbing with her as Vernice, our beautiful assistant pastor with the big gospel voice, envelops Lucy in a hug. I’m simultaneously crying, smiling, and passing tissues up and down the pew.

She pulls herself together and concludes with a thank-you to her pastors, her confirmation mentor (the woman who met with her each month during her confirmation study), her moms, and her sister. A bit later in the ritual of confirmation, she will share with the church, as each person does when they join Broadway, what she sees as her ministry. “My ministry,” she says with firm assurance, “is making music and supporting my family and friends.”

I hug her tight as she returns to her seat. The congregation thunders its applause. Someone reaches over the pew to pat Lucy on the back. Someone else gives my arm a squeeze. “That didn’t sound like any fourteen year old I ever heard,” another member whispers to me. Even Gracie, no emotional pushover, needs a Kleenex.

Speaking with an openness that few adults could muster, Lucy has summoned the language that brings together so much that I hold dear: my loving, lovable, proselytizing father; the tensions between an evangelical and a progressive theology; our motley church congregation of gay and straight, old and young, black, white, brown, and Asian church members; and our two-mom, two-daughter, interracial family.

In this moment, I am thinking, church lives out its promise. Lucy, at fourteen, describes church as a radically welcoming place and each of us as the hands and face of God in the world. It really could be that simple.