

. . . filled with the Holy Spirit . . . they began to speak in different tongues. Acts, 2: 4

Speaking in tongues in the early Church usually meant uttering something similar to what jazz singers call *scat* – I think of Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Prima, Louie Armstrong, Mel Tormé . . . random syllables rhythmically cascading out of their mouths, turning their voices into musical instruments too excited to utter things intelligible. Temperamentally I'm too shy to let myself go like that but in ancient times in places like the Middle East I'm sure people were less inhibited when expressing their joy, feeling, faith. It must have been more like the noise of a baseball crowd after its team hit a home run!

Of course the quote from Acts above adjusts the phenomenon to make it seem the disciples were speaking in the actual, intelligible languages of the many nationalities gathered outside their house – which is really an imaginative way of anticipating that future day when the Good News of Christ would be of universal relevance, a Gospel the whole world in all its different dialects would soon understand and proclaim.

Actually by the time of St. Paul the *scat* expression of Christian enthusiasm may have become annoying; people at assemblies jumping up to distract those longing to hear what a preacher was saying. Anyway, Paul gives evidence of something like that when in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians he says things like: *one who speaks in tongues (let's stay with scat) does not speak to human beings but to God, for no one listens . . . he builds (inflates) himself up . . . Now, brothers, if I should come to you speaking in tongues, what good will I do you if I do not speak to you by way of revelation (open up the windows of your mind and heart), or knowledge, or prophecy, or instructions? Likewise, if inanimate things that produce sound, such as flute or harp, do not give out the tones distinctly, how will what is being played on flute or harp [the melody] be recognized? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?*

Which reminds me of my ancestor Henry Wood Jr. who at age 15 enlisted with his father in the 99th Pennsylvania Regiment of the Army of the Potomac at the start of the Civil War. Being but a boy he was assigned to be a fifer in the regiment's fife and drum corps. This was not a role to be taken lightly. In those days the fife and drum corps played music on the long marches and very specific musical signals relative to camp activities and battle maneuvers – the din of battle often making oral commands inaudible. Henry along with his father served until, in January 1863, Henry Jr. was discharged because they finally discovered and, as his records state, Henry “couldn't fife.” (Which meant he missed the Battle of Gettysburg – which his father didn't.)

But getting back to St. Paul and scat, he continues in 1st Corinthians: *if you . . . do not utter intelligible speech, how will anyone know what is being said? You will be talking to the air. . . there are many different languages in the world, and none is meaningless; but if I do not know the meaning of a language, I shall be a foreigner to the one who speaks it and the one who speaks it a foreigner to me . . . Therefore, one who speaks in tongues (scat) should pray to be able to interpret.* Paul then confesses: *I thank God that I speak in tongues (engage in scat) more than any of you [I get excited], but in the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, so as to instruct others, than*

ten thousand words in scat! Paul had of course already revealed the gift of the Holy Spirit that *really counts*; what Pentecost is *ultimately about* in his classic poem in 1st Corinthians 13 which begins: *If I speak in human and even angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong, a clanging cymbal.*