

Claiming Joy and Truth in a World that (Still) Misunderstands and Misses Out on #BlackGirlMagic

Acts 2:1–13 and Acts 16:16–19

Introduction

Throughout Scripture, we hear stories of prophets speaking truth, God making miracles, and joy bursting forth. Over and over, we hear about the wonder of revelation emerging through a wide variety of people in diverse circumstances. Just as often, we hear of authorities, power players, community members and even disciples who misunderstand and miss out. Their own expectations limit their spiritual vision and they overlook opportunities to experience how God shows up in the world — and with whom.

While it's easy to distance ourselves from these biblical figures, celebrating the wise and wagging fingers at the foolish, we are better served if we take the text as a kind of mirror, an opportunity for critical and careful self-reflection, recognizing that we do much the same thing today.

As we continue to explore the school-to-prison pipeline, we turn our focus to the joy and wonder of youthful #BlackGirlMagic, too often ignored, squelched or even punished by individuals and systems that still don't quite understand the wonder of God and God's creation. In other studies in this series we consider restorative justice and alternative approaches to discipline. In this study we wonder why certain behaviors are deemed to

“...I feel like I lack a voice in my community, not only because I'm a woman, but also because I'm Black... I was recently suspended from school because I decided to speak back to my dean, because I felt like a situation I was going through wasn't right. I felt like I was being disrespected by multiple teachers on multiple occasions and I decided to voice my opinion about it and how I felt and I was told that it was talking back and that it wasn't necessary.” —Miasia, 16, Girls for Gender Equity (Miasia was suspended for a week for “talking back.”)

Watch Miasia and other members of Girls for Gender Equity share their stories here: [youtube.com/watch?v=-y0AmxZMgpQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-y0AmxZMgpQ).

require discipline at all? After all, much of the racial disparities we see in discipline arise before the discipline stage, entirely, when systems wrongly interpret as “problems” what is really just the natural and holy self-expression of young children and adolescents of color. Similarly, much behavior that is deemed problematic for girls and young women is, in fact, holy and good, self-assertion that is to be nurtured and honored as an essential survival skill in a world where women and children still come last far too often. Sometimes what is perceived as “problem” in need of “solution” is, in fact, difference in need of celebration.



United
Methodist
Women

FAITH • HOPE • LOVE IN ACTION

Maybe you approach this study as someone who has been punished just for being yourself. Maybe you approach this study as someone who has been the unwitting punisher, misunderstanding and misinterpreting someone else's sacred self-expression. Maybe — probably — you approach with a knowledge of both experiences, to some degree.

So, now, we invite ourselves to deeper reflection, considering both these experiences as they appear in two biblical texts from the Book of Acts, the story of the church's very beginning:

- The story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13)
- The story of a Slave-Girl with a Spirit of Divination (Acts 16:16–19)

These stories may be familiar, but we turn to them, now, with fresh eyes, and an invitation to view them in light of the particular experience of misunderstood #BlackGirlMagic.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, we give thanks for the glory of your diverse creation. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, one and all, and you move through each of us. We confess that our expectations, at times, are too small. We miss You and misunderstand You. We misunderstand and harm each other. We lock up and hide away our full selves. We pray that you will give us the courage to be fully who we are and the wisdom to receive one another completely. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Bible Study

Part 1: Pentecost

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya belonging to Cyrene,

and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs — in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” (Acts 2:1–13)

Discuss

Imagine that you are there among the crowd. You suddenly hear someone speaking to you in your own native language. You look around and you see that others are experiencing the same: hearing their own, distinct native languages. How do you feel in this moment? What are you thinking?

In this miracle, one language (spoken by the Galileans) is turned into many languages (spoken by many, many groups). Often, the church talks about many becoming one. But this is a miracle of one becoming many. Differentiation is a path to community and understanding rather than uniformity. What is the difference between these approaches? What might this suggest for our life today?

The Bible passage lists out many languages and communities here, explicitly naming “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” Why do you think the Bible takes the time to explicitly name each of these groups? What lesson might this offer today for the value of naming and celebrating culture difference?

Scripture tells us that responses to this miracle of tongues and ears are mixed. Some wonder in amazement and ask, “What does this mean?” Others sneer, dismissing the experience, saying that they were all just drunk. Put yourself in the position of each of these groups. What might the amazed group be thinking? What about the sneering group? Which group do you identify with more and why?

The tendency to sneer and dismiss what we cannot understand is common. Many of us have had experiences as those who were dismissed and/or those who were the ones doing the dismissing. If you feel comfortable, share your experience. What happened? How did you respond? How did you feel?

This passage talks directly about a multilingual community coming together across lines of difference. Crossing language barriers remains an important part of Christian community today. In what ways do you experience the gifts of multilingual community in your life today? How does your church support the gifts and graces of people who speak different languages? How does your public school do so? Other community institutions?

It is not only literally different languages that serve as communication barriers. Cultural differences can also result in misinterpretation across lines of difference. Consider the

experiences of children and youth, especially the experience of Black girls, in educational settings. Who is sneering? Who is amazed and perplexed? Who is speaking in tongues and engaging in the miracle of translation? Who is listening and being astounded to hear their own language?

What would it take to transform our schools and communities into places where diversity was celebrated and affirmed, places of everyday, holy Pentecost?

Part 2: The Enslaved Girl with a Spirit of Divination

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. (Acts 16:16–19)

Discuss

While many of us have heard this story as part of the plotline of Paul and Silas’ journey, most of us have given little careful consideration to the slave girl herself. She is often treated as a background character rather than a central figure. Why do you think that is? What difference might it make to focus on *her*, not just Paul and Silas? How might that shift in perspective strengthen both our practice of Bible study *and* our practice of mission and ministry?

This enslaved girl is acting quite remarkably. She recognizes Paul and Silas as agents of God, follows them and loudly proclaims this truth to the world. We could imagine other characters who do the same and are hailed as prophets. Yet this enslaved girl is treated as a moneymaking machine by her enslavers and as an annoyance by Paul. What shapes her enslavers’ view of her? What shapes Paul’s view of her? What are other possible ways to view her and her actions?

What are the parallels you see between how this girl is treated and how Black girls have been treated historically? Currently?

In speaking out about the Most High God and a way of salvation, the girl is irritating both the people who claim to own her *and* Paul and Silas. She continues for days and days.

Why does she do it? What motivates her to speak this truth, given the possible consequences?

Think about this girl's experience and actions in light of today's conversation about #BlackGirlMagic. Do you think this girl is showing her own #BlackGirlMagic here? Why or why not?

As we've been learning, there are significant racial disparities in school discipline. These disparities are particularly pronounced when it comes to subjective offenses, like "insubordination" or "disruption." We regularly hear about cases where Black girls are severely disciplined for behavior deemed "insubordination" by school authorities but considered "just being (or expressing) myself" by the girls themselves. How might today's Bible passage invite us to think differently about perspectives on what constitutes "insubordination" and from whose perspective?

Making Connections

We introduced this study talking about #BlackGirlMagic. How does #BlackGirlMagic appear in these texts? How does #BlackGirlMagic appear in your life and the life of your community?

Creative Thinking

The girl in Acts 16:16–19, like many in the Bible, is not given a name by the text. Think about famous (and not-so-famous) women from history and from your own experience. Who shares the gifts, graces, suffering and magic of this girl? We often think of the namesake process as one where we know the names of our forebears, meet a new and unnamed child, and give that child the ancestor's known name. Because of the missing stories of biblical women and children, we invite you to do the inverse as a thought experiment: name the unnamed ancestor after the girls and women who followed her. Who might be a worthy namesake for this girl?

Reflecting Back

Did you see yourself in these texts? Why or why not? What feelings came up for you in these readings?

Life Application/Mission Focus

How is your organization showing up to support Black girls and young women? Other girls and young women of color? If you are not yet doing so, why not? Who could help you be more effective in this area of your ministry?

Inviting and Including Others

What organizations in your community support Black girls and women? Native American girls and women? Latina girls and women? Asian/Pacific Islander girls and women? Biracial girls and women? Others not named here?

Ask these groups or organizations to tell you what you can do in your community to help support girls and young women.