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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Judges 12: 1-6; Acts 2: 1-12  
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### **Exophony: On the Boundaries of Language**

Here is something that has filled me with life over the past several years: in painfully slow increments, morning by morning, I have been learning to speak and to read Spanish. A few years ago now, a friend and mentor sidled up to me during a visit to Colombia, and he said, “I’m giving you seven years to become fully fluent in Spanish.” It’s the kind of challenge that I take very seriously from a teacher, and so I began working at it. I started getting up at 5:45 or so every morning, and then writing out verb tenses, nouns, and prepositions, and then eventually sentences, filling up four large notebooks over the years.

After a while, I found a teacher in Mexico, Antonieta, and over the last several years a friendship has grown. We meet over Zoom every Monday, and one day soon I hope to visit her and her husband in the city of San Miguel, where they live. One time, in a moment when I was frustrated at my inability to express something, Antonieta said to me, “Steve, you are building a whole new house of being. You are building a whole new dimension of yourself right now. And so be patient. It is very hard to build a new house of being.”

I loved her response - she is a wonderful and wise teacher. And moments of frustration aside, I have loved building this new house of being. It makes me feel as though I have stumbled onto a secret for avoiding stagnation, for avoiding the doldrums of mid-life that so many of us tend to go through. Some people have to reinvent themselves with a new job, or a new car, or sometimes a new romantic partner, and I’m not here to cast judgment. Life is tricky sometimes, for all of us. But at least for me, there has been enormous satisfaction in greeting the middle years of my life in this way, by building a new house of being. It has helped me to connect more fully with the hemisphere we inhabit, with many of the neighbors who live close by, and with a host of cultures that, previously, I could only access at a far greater remove.

But I also like what is happening inside of me as I learn. Because I’m so prone to mistakes, I feel both humble, but also somehow more playful. The part of me that is used to mastery, the part of me that needs to be in control, the part of me that is over-serious and analytical, those parts have to live in a state of suspension. And so I’m left feeling lighter, freer, more curious, and ultimately more alive. It’s as though the walls of my self have become just a little more porous, and a little less firm, and it feels pretty wonderful. Frustrating sometimes, sure. Disorienting at times, of course. But also wonderful.

A Japanese writer named Yoko Tawada, who lives and works in Germany, but who travels often throughout Africa and Asia, has called this indeterminate state of being exophony, a word she defines as “standing outside of one’s mother tongue.” She writes, “I can’t help but feel a fondness for the term, resonating as it does with the word ‘symphony.’ There are many different kinds of music in the world. What happens when you step outside the cocoon of your own mother tongue? What new kinds of music do you begin to hear?” Tawada’s dispatches from cities around the world, and her question, “what happens when you step outside the cocoon

of your mother tongue?” become navigational tools in a time haunted by displacement, exile, the reactionary politics of isolation.<sup>1</sup>

It turns out these are questions the Bible is very much interested in. Which means that what I’m describing is a matter pertaining to religion, and to the practice of faith. I’ve selected two stories from the Bible that illustrate the experience of exophony. The first, coming from the Book of Judges, is an experience of the catastrophic failure of exophony, a lesson we must reckon with right now. The second, found in the Book of Acts, records an instance of ecstatic and transformative exophony, of a sort that we might strive to emulate. Both stories convey important truths for our world today.

Those of you reading the Bible in one year know well that the Book of Judges is stuffed to the brim with psychopaths and lunatics, together with the ghastly events they initiate. And yet the stories occasionally contain flashes of insight. One such passage is the story of the shibboleth, found in chapter 12. Here’s how it plays out: an intertribal dispute has broken out between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites. The Ephraimites feel slighted that they hadn’t been invited by Jephthah, the leader of the Gileadites, to participate in a successful military campaign. The Gileadites, for their part, resent that the Ephraimites didn’t show up to help. And so they go to war, and the Ephraimites are defeated. After the fighting, those among the Ephraimites who survived attempt to go home. But they must cross the Jordan River to reach their land. The Gileadites set up sentries at the river to catch the Ephraimites. The only problem is that it’s impossible to distinguish between the tribes. They look the same. They dress the same, and they even speak the same, save for a very minor linguistic difference. The Gileadites can form the sound “shhhh,” while the Ephraimites cannot. And so a test is devised. If a person trying to cross the Jordan is able to pronounce the word “Shibboleth” - a word meaning stream or flood in Hebrew - with the “sh” sound intact, they were allowed to live, for they were Gileadite. If the person pronounced it “ssss” they were killed. According to the text, some 42,000 Ephraimites were slaughtered for their inability to form that particular phonetic sound.

Freud would have called this the narcissism of small differences, but we know well how small differences can become magnified into outsized proportions. A small and insignificant divergence in speech or praxis can spell the difference between insider and outsider, but also, sometimes, between life and death. Exophony fails in such moments, or it is rigorously suppressed. Neither the Gileadites nor the Ephraimites were capable of putting themselves into a state of exophony. That is to say, they could not exist anywhere outside of their mother tongue, which means they could only sense the realities their native tongues allowed them to perceive. And the slightest difference in pronunciation, between “shh” and “sss” meant the ability to recognize those worthy of life, and those worthy of nothing more than slaughter.

Would that Jephthah, the Gileadites and the Ephraimites were merely a part of the distant past, and nothing more. But they continue to haunt us, for we too have our shibboleths. There are those who would establish English as the sole national language of the United States, and who would, in subtle or unsubtle ways, mistreat those who reveal their difference through speech. But shibboleths show up in other ways too. Are not a passport, and citizenship papers, modern forms of the shibboleth? If you can produce such documents, you will be spared arrest, imprisonment, deportation, and other humiliations. If you cannot, the justice system will be merciless. Or, to name another example, it bears saying during Pride Month that the mere sway of the hips, or the softened inflection of speech, can still signify a form of difference that results

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<sup>1</sup> Tawada, Yoko, *Exophony: Voyages Outside the Mother Tongue* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2025). See chapter 1 for the quotations cited here.

in mockery, or far worse, in communities unprepared to recognize gender and sexual difference. The shibboleth and its many echoes are still with us, in many guises and forms.

Thank God, then, for the story of Pentecost found in Acts 2. It is a scene in which it becomes clear that God desires the experience of exophony for all of her children. There, to have the Spirit is to have language. It is to be pulled out of oneself, ecstatically, exophonically, and granted the ability to speak and to understand tongues other than one's own. In the biblical text, understanding is granted as a gift, but for most of us, it comes through long hours of verb conjugations and sentence repetitions. No matter. In either scenario, a spiritual event takes place. The comprehension of words produces a comprehension between peoples, which produces a scene resembling intoxication, so welcome is this reality. In this Pentecostal reality, it is as though the Gileadites and the Ephraimites gaze upon one another and smile, relieved to be done with their enmity.

I'm reminded of a story told about my friend Robert Farris Thompson, a scholar of African art and ritual down at Yale. In addition to his skills as an art historian and teacher, Thompson was a gifted student of language, and he was able to converse in all sorts of tongues throughout the Atlantic world. I once brought him to an event here at FCCOL, and afterwards he shocked some of our friends from Congo by having a conversation with them in KiKongo. So anyway, the story is that Thompson was once doing field research in Angola in the midst of a civil war. Thompson wasn't bothered by such trivial matters. But then his car was stopped. Soldiers spotted Thompson in the car, and promptly hauled him out. They bound his hands and then frog marched him down an alley where they were prepared to shoot him. Then they realized that Thompson was speaking to them in their own language. And I kid you not, when the gunmen heard that, they stood in stunned silence. Then they put their weapons down, untied him, and offered him a beer before sending him on his way. That was a Pentecostal moment in the deepest sense of the word. It was Pentecostal because it was exophonic. Thompson was able to emerge from the cocoon of his own native tongue, and it saved his life.

We have, of course, been speaking about the realm of language, but I want to suggest that religion itself is a form of language. If you have ever been to a funeral here, you have heard me say something to the effect that religion is a language that humans have developed for accessing the realm of the deep - of the mysteries - within our lives. When used well - when it is not used to control - religion can be a good and effective language for accessing the depths. You have also heard me say that there are many other good languages for accessing the deep - the arts for example, but also the natural world and our relationships.

Most interesting of all, though, are other religious expressions. These are languages of the deep that have developed in vastly different geographical spaces, and which speak into the mysteries of the world in ways that sometimes feel akin to what we know, and sometimes feel very very different. By stepping into those spaces we are given an experience remarkably akin to exophony, when, religiously speaking, we step outside the cocoon of our mother tongue. It can make us feel uncertain. It can make us feel a little disoriented. It can make us want to rush back into familiar patterns and idioms. But there's also an immense joy that comes from such encounters. Like learning a new language, the fences and borders we use to keep up our identities become just a little more porous. The parts of us that wish to be in control just can't operate in the same way. And it frees us to respond to other people, and their traditions, with a sense of curiosity, openness, even sometimes with a sense of reverent play.

In a time and a place where pluralism is being challenged, I believe people of faith need to be more than monolingual. Learning to speak another language might be one of the more

useful, but also one of the more subversive things we can do right now to counter the isolationist spirit of our age. But I would go further in saying that as people of faith, we need to practice exophony with regard to the religious language we may be used to speaking. Most of us, I think, would hope that our children speak more than one language fluently. In the same way, I would hope that we might all become fluent in at least one other religious language. I would hope that we might all learn to practice exophony.

That's why I was glad that our confirmands visited the Chester synagogue a few weeks ago, with further visits to different religious communities scheduled for the fall. But it also represents the kind of work we do when we welcome our Cuban friends to FCCOL, as we will two weeks from today, asking them to share their songs and practices with us. This year, immediately after the service, we'll be going to the Duck River Cemetery, to the section at the back where those who had been enslaved in Old Lyme are buried. And you'll be invited to see how they honor and reverence the dead, the ancestors, those who, through their living, helped make way for future generations. You'll see how music and prayer, but also rituals involving tobacco and rum are used to venerate those who came before. To be in the presence of such a ritual space is to become exophonic, standing outside of the mother tongue which we ourselves use to name the sacred. It is, in effect, an outgrowth of Pentecost itself, where languages and traditions meet one another in a spirit of shared appreciation. You are all invited to the city of the dead that is Duck River Cemetery two weeks from today.

So too, later this summer members of FCCOL will be invited into a domain that few Protestant Christians are given to visit, as we attend the Afro-Brazilian ceremonies in and around the city of Salvador. There is an exuberance to these ceremonies that is wholly unlike most of us have experienced. We'll see individuals in ecstatic communion with spirits. We'll see traditions that have enabled people to retain their humanity through caldrons of suffering. We'll see practices that were transplanted onto American shores, but whose roots can be traced back thousands of years. We'll encounter what I think of as an alternative classicism, another antiquity, which has shaped the world we know every bit as much as the cultures of Athens or Rome or Jerusalem. In doing so, we shall become exophonic, without forgetting our mother tongue, without ignoring the idiom of the sacred that we ourselves speak. But we shall learn to dwell in that indeterminate middle space where new houses of being can be constructed. It is in such ways that the shibboleths, those features of existence that keep human beings apart, are overcome by the spirit of understanding, by the Holy Spirit demonstrated in the event of Pentecost.

As a minister, I believe we need to be exophonic Christians, capable of standing outside our mother tongue and our mother tradition, even while operating within it. When we do, we practice a Pentecostal reality. Shibboleths are undone, the tortured legacies of the Gileadites and the Ephraimites are set aside, and a new kind of humanity is born.

In the words of my teacher Antonieta, it is hard to build a new house of being. But sentence by sentence, ritual by ritual, it is a joy to do so, for the very spirit of love animates the work. And you never know...it just might save your life. Amen.