

In May, 2003, in New Chapel Hill, Texas a woman by the name of Deanna Laney awoke in the middle of the night. She heard a clear voice in her head. It was not her own. It was God's. Convinced by its authenticity, she listened closely and did as was commanded. And so she took her 8-year old son Joshua out to the backyard and smashed his head in with a rock. She went back inside and did the same to her 6-year old son, Luke.

A member of a local Assemblies of God church, Deanna sang in the choir. She and her family attended every Sunday worship and participated religiously in the life of the believing community. A year or so before the killings, Deanna began to hear whispers. Soon after the whispers grew louder and she was convinced the Holy Spirit was reaching out to her with a special message. That message: that the world was coming to an immediate end and God wanted her to get her house in order; AND!! that she and Andrea Yates would end up working together as God's only witnesses in the end-times. Andrea Yates, you might remember, famously murdered her five children by drowning them after she came to believe they were quote "unrighteous, and doomed to perish in the fires of hell" unless she released them from the evil of this world as a sign of love.

How can we know?

I imagine most, if not all of us, would be quick to say *no, we can know...* those women clearly did NOT hear God nor the Holy Spirit talking to them. That the evil work of their hands was done not by divine persuasion, but by the mechanisms of their own souls – troubled souls yes, no doubt suffering from mental illness.

And yet, both claimed to be sure of God's real presence in their lives, in their minds. They were sure of it. In Deanna's case, scripture was even used in the defense, with references to the book of Joshua (replete with imagery of ordained war and murder) and even Psalm 137, which concludes with the prophecy: "Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Implanted with these terrible stories, she became convinced then on that fateful night in May, that the Spirit had truly descended upon her and asked her to carry out God's judgment against her own children.

How can we know?

Also in 2003, halfway across the country, yours truly was in his fourth-year at Seton Hall University enrolled in yet another internship, my third. A Psychology major, with aspirations of pursuing a Ph.D. in abnormal Psychology, I was placed at the Mental Health Association in Clifton, New Jersey, and it was there that I met a young man named Mickey.

Mickey was in his mid-20's. He had graduated from college with honors. He was working in New York City in a high-powered job making great money and accomplishing everything he had set out to. With that job however, also came a significant amount of stress. And after a particularly stressful period lasting several weeks, Mickey experienced a psychological break. You see, it's a misunderstanding that those diagnosed with Schizophrenia were always sort of off-kilter, since birth. Most often, they live normal lives until some stressful event (or prolonged period of time) triggers something that had been lying dormant within. And so, without warning and seemingly without reason, Mickey lost his way.

Soon thereafter he lost his job. His girlfriend. His friends. He couldn't afford his apartment any longer and few were willing to "put up with him" and so he moved back home with his parents. His parents though couldn't understand what had happened to their once successful son. They couldn't reconcile it. They had so much difficulty understanding Mickey's disease that they sadly only compounded his trials, asking him continuously... *can't you just go back to being okay?* But, Mickey was not going to be okay again. To make matters worse, Mickey refused to take his pills. He confessed that he hated feeling so low all the time. So muted. And so when I first met him he was classified as a paranoid-schizophrenic with delusions of grandeur.

The world, you see, was out to get him. And so were his parents. And maybe even, so was I. The only person who wasn't out to get him was a man by the name of Jesus Christ. Mickey once told me that he was Christ's 13th disciple. And that he had been given such a gift by the Holy Spirit that he was now being commissioned by God to write a new gospel, this of the life of Jesus Christ in modern day New York City. You see, to Mickey, Christ had returned already. He was living amongst us. And Mickey had become his closest companion. Because no one else could hear Christ's voice. Because, "they were hearing wrong." But Mickey, he heard him right every night. Clear as day. And at the end of each of their

conversations, Jesus would tell him, *“Peace Mickey, My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, give I unto you.”*

How can we know?

Honestly, I miss my conversations with Mickey. After the initial bouts of suspicion, he was so gentle and so calm with me. He was not a raving lunatic. He always offered me fresh cookies before we started talking. There wasn't a violent bone in his body, there wasn't an ill tendency in his mind, at least that I could tell. He simply wanted, and believed, that he was actually walking and talking with Jesus, the Son of God, and he wanted others to know about this special relationship with his Savior.

Now, was he being deceived by his malady? Was his brain deceiving him and consequently attempting to trick me? Or, just maybe, maybe...Mickey was letting me in, and indeed all of us, on a remarkable truth. That Christ has returned and is already at work with those who need him most. How can we know?

Paul writes: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

My friends, this morning we have asked repeatedly, how can we know? How can we know and ever truly discern that it is indeed the heavenly Spirit descending upon us, as opposed to say, just our own human and flawed consciousness ascending within? Well, after our examination of evangelicals, murderers, and a rather gentle schizophrenic, I honestly don't have a perfect answer for you. Sure, there is perhaps something that could be said along the lines of what we find in 1 John, in that the only way we can discern the Spirit of Truth is by measuring our actions by degrees of love. But even that can be skewed, that is, if folks like Deanna and Andrea continue to believe that the horrible things they do are out of some misguided place of love...

So in the end, I think maybe the most fitting thing is to admit that there is so much more to life, to all of this, than we know or are aware of. That there are dimensions that science is only beginning to grasp at, and yet still, it will never know all. So just maybe certain people are more spiritually tuned than the rest. Just maybe those who spoke in tongues in that church some years ago were legit. Just maybe Mickey was actually experiencing Christ, and their conversations were real and authentic.

Who knows? But I think if we are simply to respect each other, as we are so often in this faith charged to do, our best approach at arriving at knowledge might be to lower our brows of suspicion, and be willing to at least embrace the possibility. The mystery.

So maybe, just maybe we Presbyterians here at PCCH, can try, even if just for a moment, to entertain the notion that the Spirit is actually here, present today in this place on Pentecost, ready to light a fire in each of us, leading us on paths anew, inspiring us to dare, and step outside of ourselves, our rationalities and comfort zones, and maybe, just maybe to even experience something we previously have only read about in scripture or have dismissed as sensational, irrational, beneath us, or insane.

Amen.