

[show confirmation slide show]

We did more, but we did it faster. And I dropped some pieces. Sarah never built the scale model of Solomon's Temple that I had planned, or filled out the Mad Libs story of the Protestant Reformation that I'd put together, or created an all-new Prezi about United Church of Christ structure and governance. What she did do was give me some good stories about ministry that she saw going on among people she knows. She offered our opening prayer a couple times. She read some excerpts from Paul's letters and put them into her own words. And she created this poster of the liturgical calendar, with colors and symbols for each season.

So have we "done" confirmation class? Have we produced a formidable scholar and spiritual athlete who fully understands the Christian life and journey? "Fully understands," probably not. But let's think about full understanding.

On the day of Resurrection, Jesus' disciples did not understand what had happened. For weeks, they huddled together and waited for the other shoe to drop. Some of them experienced Jesus coming to them, speaking and eating with them, but others did not. They continued to be as they had been, disorganized, uncomprehending, fearful.

Then came the day of Pentecost, when tongues of flame licked them and the breath of the Holy Spirit blew upon them, and suddenly they understood what God had done. They were able to speak in every language and be understood by the native speakers of those languages. God affirmed the many ways in which people speak of what is important—not by giving us one single language, but by allowing all languages to be understood when all are gathered together.

Stephanie Paulsell writes in *The Christian Century* about being in Italy and *almost* understanding what people around her are saying. She thinks that being on the edge of comprehension is appropriate as we move from Easter to Pentecost.

Who can claim to be wholly fluent in this season's mysteries and impossibilities, to comprehend fully its appearances and disappearances? Even those who heard the disciples preaching in their own mother tongue still had to ask: "What does this mean?"

Comprehending "God's deeds of power"—the freeing of Jesus from death, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—requires more than finding the equivalent expression in our own language. Comprehension does not arrive, once and for all, once we have looked up all the words. We glimpse the meaning of Easter intermittently in the life we share with others. Those who heard the disciples preach on Pentecost comprehended the message in their own language. But that was only the beginning. It was in the life they lived together that their answers to "What does this mean?" began to take shape. And it was the life they lived together that inspired others to try to answer that question as well. <http://christiancentury.org/article/2016-04/verge-comprehension#.VzHlpeaQ5SQ.facebook>

Paul writes to the Corinthians that their community is rich in spiritual gifts. They have wisdom and knowledge, faith and healing, miracle-working, prophecy, discernment of tongues, and more. But none of those gifts is of any significance by itself. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*" God gives those spiritual gifts for the community, not for the individuals who have those gifts. What's more, the purpose of the gifts is to unify the body, to make us all one as a congregation. As Stephanie Paulsell says, it is in life *together* that we can comprehend God's deeds of power.

Confirming Sarah today is a reminder that we should *all* be discerning our own spiritual gifts, the gifts that God wants us to share for the sake of the wider congregation. And we should be helping one another discern and cultivate our spiritual gifts. Maybe this needs to be part of our next mission conversation too.

Sarah is far from done learning, comprehending, and discerning; and so are the rest of us.

“What does this mean?” that first Pentecost congregation asked, and they kept trying to find out—in breaking bread together and praying for each other, in studying together and enjoying each other’s company, in the sharing of their possessions and caring for those in need out of that abundance. On the verge of comprehension, we are called not to perfect understanding, but to the imperfect life of community. On the threshold of what we understand and what we do not, there is room for our comprehension to be shaped by solidarity, room for us to keep our faces turned toward love. (Paulsell)

Let us pray:

Spirit of fire, your holy presence burns bright within this world. Spread your spirit throughout our communities, so that our hearts may burn with love and hope.
Amen.