Black Church is my mother tongue

To speak Black Church is to dwell in a world of metaphors about a God who is engaged in the lives of Black people.

by Yolanda Pierce in the May 2025 issue
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Illustration by Diana Ejaita

I speak Black Church. That is my mother tongue. It is the language I learned at the feet of my grandmother, church mothers, and elders. It is the language I learned in the storefront church of my youth. I speak Black Church in my private devotions with God and when I am among the saints. I speak Black Church, the language of my ancestors, as a theological language centered on the justice of God.

When I learned in college that Black English, also known as African American Vernacular English, was a language, I wasn't surprised. Encountering the scholarship of Geneva Smitherman in her classic *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* confirmed what I had always known: Black children are raised bilingual. They are taught to code switch between the language they speak at home and the language they must use in public discourse. There is a distinct grammar, vocabulary, and structure to Black English that can be parsed and studied like any other language. It is neither "broken English" nor slang but rather a distinctive dialect with a history, origin story, and construction.

As a womanist theologian, I posit that Black Church is a specific linguistic category of Black English: that is, *Black Church is a language*. The hymns, parables, wisdom expressions, and biblical narratives have combined with Black speech to create a distinctive mother tongue for those who grow up in the Black church. All aspects of this speech are theologically inflected.

For example, these are the lyrics of a spiritual that we often sing and that I find myself constantly referencing to this day:

> I've got shoes, you've got shoes,
> All of God's children got shoes.
> When I get to heaven, goin' to put on my shoes,
> Goin' to walk all over God's heaven. Heaven, heaven.
> Ev'rybody talking 'bout heaven ain't going there.
> Heaven, heaven.
> Goin' walk all over God's heaven.

The verses of the spiritual are repetitive, with only the word *shoes* changing to other objects: crown, robe, harp, wings. For the enslaved who penned the song, having an actual pair of shoes was not at all a given. So to declare that one has shoes, or a crown, or a robe: this was to speak that which was not into existence.

And while being outfitted in heavenly garments may have been an eschatological hope, the lyrics also speak to divine justice. By insisting that everybody talking about heaven wasn't going to make it there, the song roots itself in God's judgment of self-righteousness. Some people, despite their holy talk and religious language, were not actually going to make it to heaven. Reflecting the belief of the enslaved in a God who turns the natural world upside down, the ones who lack shoes in this world—both the poor and the poor in spirit—will get to walk, fly, and shout all over God's heaven.

Such words, expressions, and songs helped me to develop an understanding of the Divine who is actively engaged in the lives of the faithful: a God who sits high and looks low. Language is the embodiment of experience, and the language of the Black church taught me to be certain of the justice and goodness of God, in contrast to the injustice and cruelty of humanity.

To speak Black Church is to say "in that great gettin' up morning" as casually as someone else would say "have a good day." It is to laugh when someone compares something that is taking too long to a choir's "grand march." To speak Black Church is to dwell in a world of metaphors, similes, analogies, and linguistic wordplay all centered on a God who is present, active, real, and engaged in the lives of Black people. It is to believe in a God who never requires that we speak someone else's language in order to be loved and valued.

To affirm that Black Church is an actual language is not to deny that the Black church is also an institution: a fixture of Black communities, built by people of African descent, with historical specificity and material reality. In the United States, the Black church emerged as a response to enslavement and as a powerful indictment of White Christian nationalism. The Black church sheltered fugitives, fed the hungry, educated generations, and continues to stand as a site of affirmation, celebration, ritual, worship, and political agency.

But even if I were to leave the physical and historical space of the Black church, I could never abandon the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart. You don't suddenly forget your language when you leave your country. Some people dismiss sentences like "I've been 'buked and I've been scorned, I've been talked about sho's you' born" as the dialect of the uneducated and ignorant. But it is a part of my mother tongue, my heart's language, and I hear in those words the lament of a people who have faced oppressive systems, forces, powers, and principalities. I

hear the language of a people who have been called everything but “children of God” and yet who refuse to lay their ’ligion down.

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, people who were sick with the virus were encouraged to use fingertip pulse oximeters to measure their oxygen levels, with lower levels being one indication of the severity of viral infection. These medical devices had been designed and calibrated on all or mostly White research subjects, and there was a significant skin color bias in the results. This fact had been known for decades and discussed widely in medical literature, but manufacturers, knowing of this racialized flaw, still failed to correct the design for products that people were now using at home to determine the severity of their illness.

For people with darker skin tones, pulse oximeters overestimated the degree of oxygen saturation, inflating numbers that were then used to make medical decisions. When Black patients reported significant trouble breathing, flawed oximeters often showed a “normal” result. Medical professionals then routinely disbelieved the patients, accusing them of exaggerating their symptoms, denying them life-saving medical treatment, and even discharging them from the hospital. Patient care was based on a racially biased machine—again, a bias that has been known for decades and yet was still embedded in the device and the health-care system.

The medical system in the United States has a long and painful history of undertreating Black patients. Medical school students are still regularly and erroneously taught that Black people have a higher threshold for pain because they have greater muscle mass or thicker skin than White people. Sickle cell patients, the vast majority of whom are African American, are routinely denied pain medication when they are in medical crisis because of the unsubstantiated perception that many Black patients are drug-seekers instead of human beings in excruciating pain.

Imagine gasping for air, struggling to breathe, and being told that because this scientific device says that you’re fine, you must have an adequate supply of oxygen. Imagine the cry of the urban asthma patient, living in a community where air pollution and toxic waste sends her to the emergency room crying, “I can’t breathe.” And she is not believed or treated. Imagine being restrained in a choke hold and repeating 11 separate times “I can’t breathe” while a video captures your last gasps. Imagine being handcuffed and detained, with a knee to your neck and back for nine minutes and 29 seconds, crying, “I can’t breathe,” and calling for your dead mother

as the life drains from your body.

These are the wounds of racism, which are both systematic and personal. Systems like health care or criminal justice or schools are structures, and the bias within them is pervasive and deeply entrenched. A country's laws, written and unwritten policies, and long-standing traditions can perpetuate systemic racism. Where one lives or if one can vote or what school one can attend are some of the consequences and repercussions of these big systems. But systems don't exist in a vacuum. People, with their biases, flaws, and sins, make up institutions and structures and systems. Systems, just like individuals, can damage people and communities.

I can speak medical jargon, if needed, having learned as a Black woman to be extremely proactive in my own health care. I arm myself with research when I engage the health-care system, the legal system, or any of the institutions and structures that I encounter. But what about those who don't speak the language of institutions? Who don't know the exact phrase to convince a nurse or doctor that they are suffering? What about those who don't know the right words to say to a judge or a jury? Or those whose experiences with these systems have been so horrific that they are rendered silent? Are they being heard? Are their cries of not being able to breathe under the constraints of racist and unjust systems being heard? And are the rest of us listening?

Fifty days after Passover, while celebrating the Festival of Weeks, the disciples of Jesus are once again gathered in an upper room. Their friend and rabbi has been crucified and resurrected, and he has now ascended. They are finally coming to the realization that Jesus was indeed the Messiah who had been promised. In this space that is a mirror of the Last Supper—and some commentators believe this event took place in the very same room as that last meal—the remaining disciples gather and experience an event that Christians believe is the birth of the Christian church.

The Holy Spirit enters the room like a mighty, rushing wind, filling the place with the *ruach* of God: breath, wind, spirit. All who are present begin to speak in other languages—languages that are not their own native tongues. Tongues of fire alight on them, on all those in the upper room who dare to believe that Christ has been raised from the dead.

The Pentecost narrative holds a special theological place for me, as a child of the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, because of its emphasis on pneumatology, the work

of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, which is far too often treated as an afterthought in discussions of the triune God, has a special role in establishing the church, as suggested by the book of Acts. Like tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit is the flame that fans the embers of this new religious movement. The Holy Spirit breathes life and vitality into what was a small group of students mourning the death of their beloved teacher, which grows into a fellowship, which grows into a movement, which grows into a worldwide church of billions of believers.

This newly forming church, these followers of the way, begin their fellowship with a meal at a physical table. They eat together. Although it is initially only the disciples of Jesus who gather, the table is metaphorically expanded and enlarged as thousands as men and women hear the message of the risen Christ, receive and believe Jesus' teachings and his promise of eternal life, and are baptized in the name of the Messiah.

The intimacy of this spiritual encounter is reinforced by the specificity of the language. New believers and new disciples are hearing this message of life and abundance in words they can understand; they hear the good news of the risen Christ in their vernacular, not in someone else's language. All can hear, and all are welcome to participate in this emerging movement.

I think of my ancestors' linguistic and theological refusal to abandon their faith, even in the presence of wickedness. I think of their words of faith, their songs of holy resistance, dancing like the tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit. These words of radical inclusivity echo in a spiritual my ancestors composed. As a child, I heard Rev. James Cleveland sing it on the albums my grandmother played:

> Plenty good room, plenty good room,
> Plenty good room in my Father's kingdom.
> Plenty good room, plenty good room,
> Just choose your seat and sit down.

I imagined the day of Pentecost as a spiritual table, like the kitchen table of my grandmother's house, with room for whosoever will come. The kitchen table of my childhood expanded infinitely on Sundays and holidays and special occasions, when the normal place settings for a family of four grew to miraculously accommodate 20 or 30 or 40 guests. There was always room—and food—for one more person.

I could not imagine a scenario in which someone would be turned away from our table. I still can't. I cannot imagine a family member or stranger not being embraced and welcomed with an offering of biscuits or pound cake. It wasn't just that there was *room* at the table; there was love and joy and laughter. The meal was already prepared for you. All you had to do was choose your seat and sit down.

Now, truth be told, as kids, we were regularly bumped from the table for adults. If the knock at the door brought another grown-up for dinner, I knew I had to give up my usual weekday spot at the dining room table. Some Sundays, and all the holidays, we had enough kids for a separate kids' table. What we learned as children is knowledge I now treasure as an adult: God multiplies whatever we freely offer, including food and hospitality.

The multiplication of food at my family's table was a paradox, as miracles often are. There is a generosity in poverty that confounds prevailing wisdom. Growing up, I did not know that we were poor. Everyone around us was similarly situated economically. The families in our neighborhood and at our church represented the invisible working poor: those who scrub floors and load trucks. The chair of the deacon board at church was the janitor at the elementary school. One of my favorite church mothers emptied bedpans until she could no longer walk the halls of the hospital. My own grandparents never completed high school and raised two generations of children on nothing but hope and pocket lint. And yet they managed to feed everybody who came to our door.

The depth of their generosity, and the generosity of all those who raised me, is especially astonishing to me now that I am the one who has to buy groceries, cook food, and pay all the bills. The people who most know deprivation, scarcity, and lack are often the ones who will give most freely, most generously, and without expectation of receiving anything in return. To know that God is a multiplier is to believe that the last shall one day be first.

So the story of Pentecost entails the radical inclusivity of a table where all are welcome to sit and eat. Pentecost is also about the breath of God, about restoring life to the wounded and broken. For the family and friends of Jesus, still mourning his death, the breath of God brings comfort: their Messiah is yet alive and is preparing an eternal place for them. To the weary pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, the breath of God brings restoration: after travels through various lands and countries, they hear the good news of Jesus in their own mother tongue.

To the women whose gifts had been denied, the breath of God affirms their gifts of prophecy. Daughters are no longer commanded to be silent. In a world that steals the life-sustaining breath of far too many, the Holy Spirit is a fresh wind—a deep, cleansing, healing breath to those struggling to breathe. For all who believe, the Holy Spirit is a Divine Comforter in a profoundly discomforting world. “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off” (Acts 2:39).

To hear the gospel in your own language, in your mother tongue, as do the pilgrims in Jerusalem, is to know that God created difference and loves all of creation and the multiplicity of language, identity, race, ethnicity, and culture that make up creation. Acts 2:11 says that Jews and converts to Judaism, Egyptians and Romans, Arabs and Libyans, among many other groups, all heard “the wonders of God in [their] own tongues.”

I can’t help but reflect on this in our contemporary setting, how significant it is for life-and-death information to be communicated in ways we understand. What does it mean for the Spanish-speaking mother to talk about her sick child with a pediatrician in her own language? What does it mean for a first-generation Korean immigrant to find a church and hear prayers in the same language his grandmother used to pray? How significant is it for an 80-year-old struggling with illness to have her treatment and care explained in ways that are compassionate and not patronizing? Language matters. And it matters whether the tone and tenor of the message are dignifying.

This is the holy lesson: Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, you can breathe freely and easily. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, you can worship in your mother tongue without having to code switch or translate for others. We know that God understands even our groans and wordless utterances. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, difference is joyfully celebrated and affirmed.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is room at the table for whosoever will come. There is warmth for the weary and love to inflame your hope. There’s welcome for the wounded and comfort for those whose healing still lies far and away in the future. There’s a radical inclusivity that doesn’t require you to abandon your identity or your dialect or your mother tongue or your heart’s language. At God’s table, you can breathe easy, take your seat, and sit down.

This article is excerpted from Pierce’s new book, The Wounds Are the Witness: Black Faith Weaving Memory into Justice and Healing*, just published by Broadleaf Books.*

The *Century*'s community engagement editor Jon Mathieu speaks with Yoland Pierce about the theological language of Black Church, its insistence on God’s justice, and its interaction with the Spirit.

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