

Pentecost, Yr. C

June 9, 2019

Genesis 11: 1-9; Acts 2:1-21

As you know, Luke wrote both the Gospel named after him and the Acts of the Apostles. Both of those books emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit – first in the life of Jesus and then in the life of the church. And it's that coming of the Holy Spirit to the church, to the followers of Christ, that we celebrate this morning. I think it's a good idea to spend a bit of time thinking about what we mean by the Holy Spirit. Many of us grew up when the language was the Holy Ghost, which led to a fair amount of confusion. It's often said that the study of the Holy Spirit, that third person of the Trinity, has lagged behind other study in the church. What DO we think of when we think of the Holy Spirit? If we just think of 'spirit' we can think of it as the animating force of a person or place – if it's a person we are thinking of, their spirit is connected to their energy, their vision, their motivation – it's an energizing principle, or life essence. When we talk about the Holy Spirit, it's the same idea, except that here we are talking about the essence of God, of God's essential power. The Holy Spirit is the spirit or the power that shaped and animated Jesus' vision and life. One way of stating it is that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus, now no longer limited by time and space – that Jesus who once took flesh as one of us, now lives on in OUR flesh, OUR lives.

Pentecost is about power. Luke tells the story using images of fire and wind. You'll remember that in the OT, fire was associated with the presence of God – the burning bush, or the fire on Mt. Sinai, for instance. And wind – the word in Latin, in Greek and in Hebrew can be translated as spirit, or wind or breath. It's that same idea of the animating life force – think back to the spirit hovering over the waters at creation or the story of God creating humans, enlivening them with God's very breath. Or think of the story of all those dry bones in Ezekiel – God pulled the bones together and then brought them to life with his breath.

The idea shows up in popular culture as well. George Lucas entertained and inspired a whole generation with his Star Wars movies. Remember the

phrase, “May the force be with you.”? He said that he put the “...Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more a belief about God than about any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery,” Lucas said.

In the deacons’ school, we’re using the book by Luke Timothy Johnson on the NT. His basic thesis is that those first disciples of Jesus had an experience of power, first in the person of Jesus and then in the Holy Spirit, and that experience transformed their lives. We all know their story – they went from a confused, frightened group to convicted, courageous people who spread the message of Jesus throughout the world.

There’s a lot of miraculous stuff happening the story of Pentecost, but the biggest miracle I think, is that people heard, really heard, and understood the message of Christ. In the text this morning, we hear that part of Peter’s message that tries to explain that, no, they aren’t filled with wine, instead they are filled with that spirit that the prophet Joel predicted. But if we push that a bit further, I think it’s worth thinking about what the basic Christian message was then and is now.

Historians tell us that the people who heard that message in the first days of the church were living in a culture that was quite fatalistic. It was also a culture in which the vast majority were oppressed, marginalized, poor, and powerless. So to hear the basic message: that God was good, that God created and sustained all life, that God loved each and every person, that because of that love, each person mattered, each person was worthwhile – that message was liberating and empowering. And that message - about hope and the possibility of transformation is as needed today as it was then.

But there’s also another message. One that’s connected to the Genesis reading about the tower of Babel. And that message is, I think, even more crucial today than perhaps ever before. I’m sure you’ve all heard sermons about that tower – that it was about human hubris and that God came down and made it impossible for them to understand one another because their

common language was splintered into many languages. If you can't communicate with your fellow builders, you aren't going to get very far.

Scholars writing today are offering a different interpretation of that scripture. The text says that the people, living in a homogeneous culture, were afraid – afraid that they might be scattered. They were happy and content where they were – they had their one culture, their one language; they weren't troubled by the challenges of difference. This alternative interpretation says that God didn't destroy that uniformity as a punishment but instead, destroyed it as an opportunity – forcing them out of their uniformity in order that they would encounter difference and diversity and learn to live in a unity that included and transcended that difference. Does that not sound like today's challenge writ large?

There is a fear of difference that can result in tribalism, in each group circling the wagons, so to speak. But what about the possibility, the vision given in the Pentecost scriptures, that a larger vision, a larger understanding of what God intends, can invite us into an appreciation of difference rather than a fear of it. What if difference can enrich and deepen our understanding of God. What if that unity that encompasses difference is exactly what God is calling us to?

I'm standing in front of the gorgeous window that Gary created for us. And I'm thinking that that window is kind of a metaphor for what I'm talking about. If he had been limited to one color or one shape we wouldn't have this beautiful creation – we'd have the plain glass window we had before. Difference and diversity allowed for the creation of beauty.

I saw a story about a time when schools were being integrated and a mother who sent her first grader off to school in the middle of the desegregation storm was anxiously awaiting her return at the end of the day. She met her daughter at the door and asked, "How did everything go, honey?" "Oh, Mom," came the reply, "You know what? A black girl sat next to me. We were both so scared that we held hands all day."

There are some things we SHOULD be afraid of and one of them is that our inability to address difference will result in destruction of our society,

and that our fear of difference will keep us from realizing the vision of Christ – that vision of the peaceable kingdom, that vision of the kingdom of God.

I'd like to close with a meditation about the unity that will characterize that kingdom:

Let there be peace between us, said the Jew, taking the hand of the Arab. From the thigh of Abraham we both emerged; let there be an end of hate.

I am weary of the Sword, said the Arab, offering bread and salt to the Jew. Let us water our gardens from the Jordan and feed our children together.

I need to know you as a brother, said the Tamil to the Parsee, offering grain. My fields hold a fine harvest; if you are hungry, share my bread.

I name you the son of my father, said the Parsee to the Tamil in return. Never shall your family lack shelter in the season of the monsoon.

Let me mend your broken plough, said the Muslim to the Hindu.

In return I and my son will help you harvest your crops was the response.

Forgive me for past injustices to you, said the White man to the Red. Let me honor your ways, smoke your pipe and walk in your moccasins.

Come into my Hogan, sit and eat with me, said the Red man to the White. Let us fill the Peace Pipe and make plans for the future of the world.

Let me bind your wounds for you, said the Black man to the Yellows. I have doctors and medicine for you and your children.

For this help, I will teach you ancient secrets, said the Yellow man.

Together we will strive to learn the secrets of the eternal Tao.

Lord God, now I understand why you created Humanity, said Lucifer. Father, forgive me; may I return home?

You never left, said God. (Dolores Ashcrof-Nowick in *Paths to Peace*)
God's plan – the reconciliation of all creation. Amen.