

Pentecost 2017

All One Tribe

Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the holy spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability.

So, is it just me, or does anyone else think that this sounds absolutely terrifying, the opposite of the conventional image of the comforting, descending little dove? This, this is a holy spirit that descends upon the disciples huddled together in their little room like a dragon with talons extended. This sounds a lot more Game of Thrones than What a Friend We Have in Jesus. But the upshot, once you got past the abject terror part, was that no matter what language the disciples were speaking, everyone could understand what was said regardless of their nationality and native language. The anti-tower of Babel. Sort of like if we were all injected with a dose of Esperanto.

For those of us who consider ourselves globalists, this sounds like winning the lottery. Imagine a John Lennon-like world without barriers, without borders to fight over or build a wall between and without miscommunication.

Episcopal priest David Henson thinks that Pentecost is one of the most radical, rebellious acts that God has performed because he confirmed that God has neither language nor nationality. "On Pentecost day," he tells us, "God spoke outside the walls of temple religiosity, outside the halls of political power, and outside the bounds of respectability. God spoke in the streets. The divine voice manifested in all languages and in all peoples, not just in the imperial Latin of the Roman occupiers who conquered the promised land and not just in the language of the religious elite who restricted access to God with oppressive temple taxes. Rather, God spoke in the vernacular of the everyday and the everywhere. On Pentecost, God gives the divine voice to the languages of a bunch of nobodies and a crowd of commoners. It is an act of liberation, both for humankind and for God."

This is powerful. The language we use, whether it's the language of our nationality, our social status or the language of our deeply held beliefs, of our faith, our language is divinely given. Reverend Henson says, "On that day when God moved in fiery inspiration, God gave the divine voice to all the languages, to the marginalized, to the street. Any time a language or a voice crying out is suppressed, it is God's voice, too, we are attempting to silence. We might do well to participate in Pentecost with this in mind, listening for the voice of God among the silenced, the powerless, the ignored, the forgotten, the oppressed, the nobodies."

"Pentecost wasn't just about evocative images of fiery tongues and a rushing wind.," he concludes. "Pentecost was a rebellion against those that would seek to restrict God to a single, respectable or official language of a single, righteous people or a single, systematic theology. Pentecost was a protest in which God refused to be silenced by the language of the powerful. Instead, on Pentecost, God spoke. And the people in the streets understood. They spoke, too, in the tongues of angels, the divine voice. Nothing could have been more subversive."

Yeah, that was then. This is now. Now I imagine what Pentecost would mean in my world. Wouldn't it be awesome if the barrier of language was lifted, if we could all hear and understand what everyone else was saying. But wait, that would mean I could hear what everyone else was saying, how everyone else feels, what everyone else believes. And I don't agree with what some people say, how some people feel, what some people believe. This can't be good. Tighten those borders.

And guess what. Although it certainly doesn't feel like it to many of us, we are old news. The world we are fumbling around in now, the world that feels like it's been divided into two tribes, the Globalists and the Nationalists, is very much like the world that existed when the holy spirit crashed in, according to UCC minister Nancy Rockwell in her blog, A Bite of the Apple. She writes the following. "The world right now is very much like the world Jesus walked around in, the first century world where fumbling the political football was causing a lot of unrest, and yes, even terrorist acts. The first century world, where the expected replacement for Emperor Tiberius in Rome was unexpectedly charged with treason and executed, and throughout the imperial world a new wave of conservatism took hold. So the unrest, the anxiety, the factionalism, the maneuvering, the leaks, the betrayals, even among the disciples, were occurring at an alarming rate. As they are now."

"But we don't think about all this when we read the Spirit passages in John's gospel," she says. We think, or at least I do, of the Pentecost stories in Luke and Acts: Ascension comes, Jesus departs. Pentecost comes, the Spirit descends on the crowd in Jerusalem, and in a spectacular act, the power of understanding spreads out across nationalities and classes, men and women, old and young. The Church begins to conquer the world. And, at least if you're Protestant, fifteen hundred years of history pass uneventfully and you fast forward to the Reformation, when important conflicts return."

She continues, "Only, that's not what happened, of course. And even more important, that is not what was happening at Pentecost. In the tense, strained petitions of Jesus, imploring God to send the Spirit to bring unity, and assuring God, over and over ...that his followers are one, that they all understand his teachings, that they are ready for the spirit that will make them all one, the conflict that is happening in the Roman Empire and that is argued over by his disciples as much as by the everyone else, is there.

The thing is, we know that Jesus' followers did not understand him, much of the time. He expressed exasperation with Peter, even to the point of calling him Satan, because Peter would end up drawing the wrong conclusions, often. The thing is, we know that Jesus' followers, even in John's gospel, don't get it. Thomas, known as doubting, cried out after Easter that they certainly did not know the way to the kingdom of heaven, despite all Jesus' teachings. The thing is, Pentecost took place in a world of divided opinions and endless arguments. Just like the world we are in."

Just like the world that we are in. I mean, have you looked outside lately? Honestly I've been kind of scared to, often feeling that, even in a nation where we ostensibly speak the same language, we are not. I'm too busy talking about what I believe to bother to hear what you feel. And you're too busy talking to hear me. Reverend Rockwell reminds us not to lose hope. Although she is describing the world into which the church would be born, it is so true now.

She says "It is into this disarray, this anguish of spirits, this argument of chicanery and corruption, this reliance upon whispers for finding out truth, that Pentecost comes. "Out of the hearts of believers will come rivers of living water," Jesus promises. And he invokes his peace upon them. His Peace. It will not bring the babble of opinions to a halt. It will never, not even for one day or one moment, produce unity

of thought. And, as with the disciples in the Upper Room, we will each have our own experience of his presence, of what it means, of what confuses us about it, of how our fears are being addressed.

But we will be able” she assures us, “if we breathe deeply, to recognize in one another the Goodwill of Christ’s Peace. And that will make it possible, as the stories in Luke and Acts tell, for us to understand each other, despite the difference in the way we see this world, the differences in our expectations of the future, and even the differences in our hopes.”

We all share our same fragile earth, clinging together in God’s vast universe. We frail humans disagree on so many things that even when we do happen to speak the same language, we might as well be circling the Tower of Babel. Some speak the language of climate change, some don’t. Some speak the language of compassion, others appear not to. Some speak the language of social justice, others close their doors and their hearts. At Pentecost, the holy spirit descended to the disciples as a frightening, fiery challenge in the midst of an equally frightening world filled with chaos. Into this cauldron the church was born.

And believe me, I know it feels like we are living through uncharted territory right now. But that’s where faith lives, isn’t it? That’s where we are being sent. On those days when it’s hard to get up, when it’s hard to read the newspaper, when it’s hard to listen to the news without pounding on the dashboard of my car, all I can do is cling to faith. To believe that we have all can receive the fiery tongue of the holy spirit and learn to understand each other. May it be so.

Amen.