

So, I find it interesting that today, the holiday of Pentecost, has traditionally been described as the “birthday” of the church.

Some churches go all out by celebrating with cakes and candles.

But Pentecost was originally a Jewish holiday.

It was a Jewish festival commemorating God giving the Law to Moses.

It happened fifty days after Passover, corresponding with tradition that Moses received the Ten Commandments fifty days after the Exodus.

The writer of the Book of Acts takes the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt and the continuing revelation of God,

and repurposes it as liberation from death for the new Christians.

The writer uses this ancient festival to show how communities that are open to the continuing revelation of God’s Spirit will survive and thrive.

Now, the text says that all the people were amazed and perplexed when they realized they could understand people who were speaking in other languages.

But here, I think that “amazed” should be considered a less-than-pleasant emotion.

This is not the excitement of a child seeing a magic trick.

Mind you, they've just heard a violent wind.

I can imagine that their feelings were more of confusion and bewilderment than amazement and joy.

Something scary was happening in their midst.

This Holy Spirit wasn't, after all, a quiet, heavenly dove.

It turned out to be a violent force that blew the church into being, whether the church wanted it or not.

One thing that I love about this story is that it shows us that the church was culturally, ethnically and economically diverse right from the start.

The people who were gathered in one place were immigrants to Jerusalem, from all over the Mediterranean basin.

The text tells us that there were about 120 people gathered together, including the 12 Apostles and Jesus' mother, Mary.

All of these people, who had different mother tongues, spoke different languages and came from different cultures, were gathered together as followers of Jesus.

Even right from the start, his message transcended all the social constructs that we put up to divide ourselves from each other.

While they received a positive, hope-filled message, it's understandable that they were scared.

A powerful wind and tongues of fire and the ability to speak and hear and understand across a variety of languages must have been a shocking experience.

But Peter, one among them, he calmed their fears.

It's always comforting to hear familiar words, especially when we are upset or frightened.

So he quotes the prophet Joel from the Hebrew Bible, whom many, if not all of them, would have been familiar with.

He tells them that all is well, this is what it's supposed to look like in the last days.

God has poured out God's spirit upon all flesh and we are moving into a new time, a new reality, the creation of God's realm on earth, according to Jesus' will for us.

There are no divisions among men, women, slaves or free, for we are all liberated.

We will experience collective salvation, all of us.

This liberation theme draws upon the original, Jewish, Pentecost, as they celebrated being liberated from Egypt.

So, in his quoting of Joel, the prophet, Peter is also prophesying.

This doesn't mean that he's predicting the future, but instead he's truth-telling, that's what it meant to prophesy.

He's telling the people what he believes, that the times have changed.

That God is intervening in the world in a new way, that salvation is collective and it's open to all.

In the Tower of Babel story, in the Hebrew Bible, nobody could understand each other because they were all speaking different languages.

But now, the miracle is that everyone can understand each other, as the language of the Gospel message should transcend literal language differences.

Yes, it's scary, and I'd bet that the people were afraid, but Peter, a natural-born leader, was there to offer words of comfort and reassurance amidst the chaos.

He said, it's okay, this is how things are supposed to be.

We are no longer divided, but united across all the things that used to separate us, including race, class, language, culture, gender, and so forth.

Now, this got me thinking about the era we're living in, which can feel really scary, like we're wading in uncharted waters.

It seems like we are more divided than ever, we're divided along ideology, class, geography, skin color, family of origin, you name it.

I think the problem for us, in this country, is not that we can't literally hear each other, because we can, we're mostly English-speaking.

But we can't understand each other because our perspectives are informed by experiences that other people can't relate to.

Northerners can't relate to southerners.

Working class folks who feel trapped in the cycle of poverty can't relate to those who are experiencing economic prosperity, and the 1% can't relate to anyone else.

People of lighter skin who pass as white can't relate to the lived experiences of those with darker skin.

People in the middle of the country, in cities and towns that feel abandoned, can't relate to those of us on the coasts, who, comparatively, are thriving.

And then there's religion.

In our realm, the realm of organized religion, those of us who are more progressive, left-leaning, pluralistic, always open to new interpretations of our scripture, we cannot relate to the more evangelical, conservative, dogmatic and biblical literalists who also identify as Christian.

The good news is that it's my hunch that the future for pluralism is bright.

I think 500 years from now, all the religious silos we divide ourselves into, if each of them is a different color, will all eventually blur together.

Most people will have religious practices, which draw upon the wisdom of many different traditions.

And we'll have worshipping communities, but I am not sure how they'll identify themselves, either as multi-religious or post-religious, because they will draw upon different religions in their services and rituals.

Again, we're talking 500 years from now, if the planet is still around, this is a long way in the future.

The bad news is that while our religious divides are slowly melting away, our ideological divides are becoming more entrenched.

Left, right, conservative, progressive, exclusivist, pluralist, in every religion, these are the divisions that are becoming more entrenched.

It's not just Christianity, it's happening in Judaism and Islam too.

Every religion has the progressive and the conservative or traditional movements.

I'd argue that we have more in common with our progressive Jewish and Muslim siblings than we do with the folks who attend the Open Bible church up the road, even though we both claim the Christian identity.

Our Burlington interfaith clergy group has no problem being interfaith, as we have pastors, a rabbi and an imam in the group, but that's because we all, basically, share the same values, we just express them through different religious traditions.

The problem is that there are a lot of clergy in Burlington who are not part of the group because they probably feel like we don't share their values.

They're the ones we need to work to be in relationship with.

This is the new frontier for our time.

It's not understanding literally different languages, or different cultures, as it was for Peter and the first Christians.

It's not getting along with people of different religions or of no religion.

Our new call is to learn how to hear and understand the experiences and perspectives of those fellow Christians who have a fundamentally different theology from us, who understand the Christian identity and calling in a completely different way.

The people who believe that Christianity is the only way to heaven,

that salvation is personal and individual,

that the Bible is the inerrant word of God,

that Jesus died for our sins to save us from eternal damnation,

that homosexuality is a sin,

that women should not be clergy,

that the earth and its resources are for our use because we have dominion over it,

and if climate change is a problem,

then God will fix it.

These are the people whom we need to learn how to be in relationship with.

Otherwise, this religion that we call Christianity will become more and more divided.

It's hard friends, it's really hard and I am not saying I even know where to begin.

Because it means that we both have to be willing to be part of the dialogue, to have open ears and hearts and minds and be willing to be changed, and honestly, I don't know if we are ready to do that yet.

But what I do know is that we need to get there eventually, because the fate of the planet depends upon it.

Christianity, is, by far, the largest world religion.

Imagine what we'd be capable of if all of us, in our many different cloaks of Christianity, could come to the table, find common ground, and work towards the betterment of humanity.

Oh what a world it would be.

So, on this birthday of the church, let us celebrate by committing ourselves to listening to, and to trying to understand, our Christian brothers and sisters who are also at the party,

but who seem to be speaking a very different religious language from us.

Amen.

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