

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Feast Day of Pentecost  
May 31, 2020

A miracle happened on the Feast Day of Pentecost. The force of love, which was released through the power of the Holy Spirit, a gift from Jesus, allowed people of many different nations, ethnicities, languages, and cultures to hear each other's truth, to become obedient (*which means to listen deeply with the heart*) to each other's inner essence or soul, and in turn, speak the same language, the only means of communication that really matters, the poetry of love.

Miracles are not to be explained, merely seen as an extra-ordinary revelation of God which promote belief and the reorientation of our hearts toward God's mission and the building up of God's Kingdom. And sometimes, in addition to the miracle itself, there is symbolism that entices us to be drawn ever more deeply into the miracle, and which can encourage us to see how that particular miracle may be continuing, by unfolding in our own lives. So, let's step back a bit, into the Hebrew Scriptures, so we can see how our story in today's lessons, connects to one of ancient times, and how it may then be imagined in our lives.

There is a tendency within all our hearts to desire uniformity and homogeneity, where all the peoples of the world look like us and reflect our values. After all, avoiding conflict is one of the most basic human defense mechanisms, and we can see uniformity as the possibility of peace, of everybody getting along, and that seems like a good thing to us.

In the story of the Tower of Babel (*Genesis 11:1-9*), we see this same tendency: to "circle the wagons", to build a fortress to keep the "sameness" contained, so that no one with new ideas about the world could come in, nor could "those unlike us" leave. However, recent Jewish scholarship on this story invites us to remember the context of this pre-historical story to understand the sinfulness God identified in the people building the tower to reach the heavens. The story of the Tower of Babel immediately follows the story when "God blessed Noah, and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth.'" Staying put, circling the wagons, creating and sustaining a homogeneous culture with one common language was working in opposition to God's command to fill the earth. Of course, we hear a similar commission in Matthew's gospel, declaring again God's desire that the earth be filled with faithful people, when the Risen Lord says to his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of ***all nations***, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." No one is to be excluded from the blessings of God.

One can imagine God "looking down from heaven" as the text tells us, or present within and among the people descendant from Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and being alarmed at what they saw being created: a culture of gathering from within, a group of people blind to anything out of their reach, their imaginations limited to the gifts already contained within their group, with no new ideas brought in for consideration, where individual thought or diversity of opinion would be crushed, where "sameness" was all they desired. The people of Babel created an existence which was comfortable, stable, and familiar.

This intention to build or live in groups that reward “sameness”, also appears when the disciples gathered in the locked room in Jerusalem. They were the only ones who truly knew the horror of the implication of Jesus’ death, and they wanted to stay together - partly for protection - but also to reinforce the shared experience of their walk with Jesus, to remind themselves that it was real, to keep the language Jesus had taught them alive, which seemed to have been brought to a complete stop at his crucifixion. It is not unlike the pockets of people or neighborhoods that developed in our cities as immigrants arrived in our country during our early development as a nation, or those who come here now, whether driven here by economic necessity, desire for religious freedom, or escape from ethnic persecution. We often use geographic boundaries to separate people into homogenous communities, so “same” people can live with “same” people, and never the twain shall meet. When I grew up in West Chester, the language used to separate was those people who “lived on the wrong side of the tracks”, the physical railroad tracks that separated the town, or in Lancaster, even though the church I worshipped and worked in was 2 blocks from the city center, the message was “stay away from those people who live on the south side of King Street”. Most likely we all grew up with a similar frame of mind, namely that people can and should be separate, based on what they looked like, how they spoke, or something else about them that defined them as the other. There was a societal pressure to stay within your group, to not marry outside your tribe, and an equal pressure to keep the “others” out. Sadly, I remember as a child, adults vividly remarking when the first African-American family moved into an all-white neighborhood, and the comments were not positive. With each one of those derogative judgments spoken, I believe God’s heart broke a bit, for we know that enforced separateness is not the intention of God as we hear in our story today.

God, however, in God’s wisdom, disrupted the fervently sought-after uniformity in the community of Babel. God confused the people’s speech, and without a common language, the peoples were scattered to the ends of the earth, and God’s desire for the earth to be filled, not just with people, but filled with diversity of people, as can be evident in the creatures of the natural world, was now true for humankind.

The story of the Tower of Babel is illustrative of the force of God which disrupts the order that we have placed upon and in our lives, which can feel so comfortable. And yet, God throws us into chaos for a bit, so new ideas can emerge, broader understandings can settle into our hearts, and our reach for assistance to those other than us can become our response to God’s faithful invitation to find an order within our lives that is aligned with God’s intention.

Jewish scholars who have been exploring this text over time have come to a compelling understanding of the message of truth within this story. Rabbi Hirsh, a 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar, states that, regarding this story, “We learn here that the Torah not only welcomes diversity, but insists upon it.” Likewise, the contemporary theologian, Isaiah Rothstein states, “It is not only our duty to welcome in the other because it feels like the right thing to do, but more so because God’s intentions were never to produce a world of uniformity, but rather strengthen us to call far and near for a world of diversity.”

So, here’s an interesting piece which begins to lay the foundation of how this call to align with God’s intention toward diversity connects to the movement of the Holy Spirit at the Feast Day of Pentecost.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest who lived until 1955, was trained as a paleontologist and geologist, and made a very bold statement: “ love is the very physical structure of

the Universe.” For Teilhard, gravity, atomic bonding, orbits, cycles, photosynthesis, ecosystems, force fields, electromagnetic fields, human physical attraction, friendship, animal instinct and evolution all reveal an energy that is attracting all things and beings to one another, in a movement toward ever greater complexity and diversity – and yet ironically, also toward unification at even deeper levels.

This energy is quite simply love under many different forms. One might expect this statement about love as the basis of the universe from a theologian, but this is a pretty astounding statement from a scientist, that love is the driving force behind all aspects of the universe and that it is a call toward each other and at the same time a summons toward greater complexity and diversity. This sounds a lot like God’s intention as portrayed in the story of the Tower of Babel: a call toward each other, but away from sameness and toward many languages, many ways to speak God’s truth, many ways to live faithfully to the ends of the earth. We may begin to understand that the divine love, which permeates our universe, is that which draws us toward that which is not us – that person at the party most unlike us, that other’s opinion that causes a visceral reaction within our being, that person whose thinking is outside our box and who calls forth from us great energy to stretch to learn their language. The divine love, which permeates our universe, invites us to extend ourselves, beyond ourselves. This makes our egos squirm a bit, because it forces us to give up our separation and with that any sense of superiority or control. The divine love, which permeates our universe, is drawing us toward God’s intention of a world where everyone does not look the same, speak the same, believe the same, or act the same.

So, what if we imagine this divine love, this energy within all created things, that which draws us together, one unto each other, with our differences sparkling as clear the light on the crest of a wave as it rolls into shore, is what landed on everyone’s head as portrayed in our story from Acts. And it is that same unifying divine love that was set on fire in our hearts at our baptism.

The Jews who came to festival came speaking many different languages, because they had been dispersed, living in the diaspora, for many reasons, at many different times, and that was uncomfortable for them at many times, and rightly so for often they were oppressed, and we too know that discomfort when we lack rootedness or don’t feel we’re among “our people” who innately understand us. But that is okay, because the Holy Spirit landed upon and within them, as with us, and summoned them, as we are summoned, into a deeper unity, the divine love which flows through all people and all created things. They each heard, in words that made sense to them, maybe for the first time, the same proclamation of grace, which comes from within them, because the Holy Spirit now dwells within them, as within us.

On this day when we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, with images of violent wind and divided tongues as of fire set on everyone’s heads, we can live into this summons by God to allow our hearts to be set on fire, our minds to become ablaze with new ideas and inspiration, and our hearts to burn for justice, drawing us always toward a more accepting and compassionate point of view, and our souls to glow with the light of Christ, as we yearn for a unity in that divine love that is the foundation of all our diversity.

The reality is the Holy Spirit comes to everyone, everyone we may imagine to be other than us, to the intellectual and the unsophisticated, the committed and the apathetic believer, the fundamentalist and the pagan, the rich and the poor, the nun and the nones, those whom we deem to be worthy to be among us, and all the others who are found worthy in God’s eyes. For all of us are called and

summoned by the same Holy Spirit, to speak the same language of divine love, for it was this that the church was built upon.

Although I understand that we each have practical choices about our involvement with the church, much of which is determined now by circumstances beyond our control, the reality is that it is not a choice for our spirit to be involved or not with the Holy Spirit, that wild, mysterious, transformational and unique movement in our hearts, which calls us forth, always summoning us on this journey of never-ending awakening, because the Spirit is within us. We are to lean into our inspirations (en-spirare or with the spirarer or breath of God) or into our enthusiasm (en theos, or in God) for when we are most alive with creativity and energy, then we know the Spirit is on the move, drawing us toward greater unity through a path of greater diversity and complexity in our lives. The Holy Spirit is our sacred guide into a new language, understood by all – love. Pentecost gives power to the band of Jesus' followers to translate divine love so as to be spoken in all the languages of the world, for the gospel to be told in every language and circumstance, to build Christianity facing toward God's intention of cultural diversity and complexity.

Our world has changed dramatically over the past few months. What was is no longer and will never be again, in the exact same way. However, if we allow the Holy Spirit to work within our souls, then we will emerge not just changed (*which can be good or bad*) but transformed, which is always toward goodness, for transformation results from the work of the Holy Spirit to align our hearts and souls toward God's mission, toward God's dream of reconciliation, ready and open to express the poetry of love.

Let us embrace the divine love energy that flows through us, strengthening us through all adversity, comforting us through all pain, uniting us at a depth with others that we cannot as humans truly perceive, and through which we find strength and grace in the glorious diversity of humankind. Amen.