

The Love of Honoring Differences

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17, (25-27)

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Last Sunday, after church, I left on my collar, donned a funny t-shirt with rainbow lettering, and drove myself over to the Culpeper Pride Festival. As soon as I say that I imagine a wide range of emotions running through the people sitting here today. And whether one's particular feelings come from religious reasons or political ones, and whether those feelings inspire shouts of glee or outrage at the news that your priest is a huge fan of Pride events, I feel confident that each person can make a strong argument defending their reaction. I am not here today to tell anyone what festivals to attend. I will tell you that as much as I love Pride events for their celebration of difference and boy do people show up at these things in a myriad different ways, one of the main reasons I attend is to let people know, in all their varied differences, that they are loved. People see my collar and my t-shirt and seem compelled to tell me two things. They love the shirt, and they don't attend church anymore. I had many of those conversations Sunday. People in pain, outraged by the church's treatment of them and the people they love; folks even brought me their theological questions. Mostly, they expressed joy in knowing there are pastors who celebrate them. To me, Pride's wild, weird, multiplicity coupled with a complete embrace of the ideal that loving others is more important than agreeing with or fully understanding them, makes these events feel far more like church than many churches do.

Today is The Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, and to understand the significance of what we are celebrating today, we need to go all the way back to the Garden. When God created the first couple, he told them to multiply, and to fill the earth. God's intent was not that all humans should remain in that Garden, but that they go into the whole rest of creation and fill the world with people to tend every corner of it. When sin

entered the world and the couple were expelled from the Garden, their offspring continued to disobey God by ignoring the design. They failed to disperse throughout the world. Instead, they realized the power they could wield when they worked together towards their own goals. Failing to tend the earth and bless the creation as instructed, they worked together saying, “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad”. When God divided their language, they weren’t being punished. God was doing what God always does, rescuing humans from themselves. They thought homogeneity was ideal because it made them so singularly powerful; they failed to realize that it was keeping them from their God-given purpose. Dividing their languages was the only way God could get them to disperse and take the riches of God’s blessing out into the whole of the world. They wanted to overcome God by hoarding blessing for themselves. But God couldn’t allow limitless blessing to be limited by human selfishness.

Pentecost is the day that the Holy Spirit came into God’s people, empowering them on earth to do the work Jesus began and to, once again, take the blessings of God into the whole world, to heal and restore. The way God chose to illustrate this power, this shockingly dynamic presence, was twofold. Recognizing the presence of an invisible, intangible spirit might have gone unnoticed, so God made it both seen and heard. First, this Spirit appeared as flaming tongues of fire. Fire is significant because it ignites, it consumes, and it enlightens, which is what the Holy Spirit would do as that fire spread throughout the world. Secondly, it was heard through the multitude of varied languages.

In today’s reading, the ability these people gained to speak in other languages manifested in Jerusalem where resident Jews and Romans from the whole world were now living and traveling. According to this text, most of these people had the ability to understand a common language because they lived, worshiped and traveled together. However, when the Spirit spoke to them on Pentecost about God’s deeds of power, they heard in their own native language. This koine Greek word means their own “peculiar” language, highlighting the distinctiveness of each person’s identity and history. It’s as if God wanted every non-

native person in Jerusalem, to know they were loved and seen in all their distinctive differences and uniqueness. Humans feel most comfortable when everyone looks and acts the same, it's how society functions, we fear difference because we don't understand it, so we minimize it. But God doesn't expect us to understand every difference; God simply asks us to love. And at this most critical moment in human history, God chose to make the Spirit known through highlighting God's preference for diversity. God is not afraid of difference; God is limitless and all the variety in the world cannot begin to exhaust God's expression of Godself. At Pentecost, through flames of fire and a cacophony of unrecognizable voices, the church was empowered to fulfil God's original design.

The problem is, we're still human. God loves us and the spirit indwells us, but our humanness means we're still really uncomfortable with things we don't understand, things outside our experience and things that conflict with the values we hold. Fear is a problem. It's a problem for many reasons but let me offer a biological one. When we feel fear, it activates our amygdala, leading to a psychological stress response through the release of cortisol. Our bodies and our feelings are linked. The Scriptures tell us repeatedly to NOT fear, and this is part of the reason. When our bodies are flooded with cortisol, we become self-protective which causes us to either lash out at others or isolate. The New Commandment is to love. Love in our hearts leads to the release of dopamine, oxytocin, and vasopressin. But our bodies can't feel or act from these helpful hormones, when our brains are privileging fear over love.

In John's gospel, Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit. He said that God was in him and that the Holy Spirit would likewise be in us. Jesus was filled with God's love. That love, through the spirit, would fill us to overflowing. Our supernatural ability to act from love means we have a supernatural ability to overcome fear. The peace that we are promised is not of this world. It is not natural. It is supernatural. Our ability to access the peace that Jesus left us is the hallmark of the Holy Spirit. Jesus never promised us an escape from the fears of living in a broken and troubled world. He did promise us that we would have access,

through the spirit, to God's love that would manifest in our ability to overcome fear, find peace, and express God's love into the whole world. That love will go out into the furthest corners, which sometimes look less like the distance of geographical proximity and a lot more like the distance between political, cultural, social, and religious ideologies.

Our Psalm tells us that God's works are "manifold", which is another way of saying many and varied. The things and people God makes extend beyond our limited knowledge and yet we all rely on God's same grace and provision. The Psalm says that God rejoices in ALL the works God does. As humans, we spend a lot of time worrying about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. We feel more comfortable when we can categorize things because it makes us feel like we understand them. As Christians our safety is found in God, not comfort. God is in us through the Holy Spirit, and we are the ones who bring the peace of love into the places that are uncomfortable and where differences exist. The spirit that landed with fire at Pentecost and spoke the native languages of divergent people is the same spirit which is in us today.

Which ought to inspire our hearts to also rejoice, like the Psalmist, in all of God's works. Now if you're thinking, I don't fear "those people" (whoever those people are), I just disagree with or dislike them. Let me say that fear and disgust utilize overlapping neuropathways and manifest in many of the same ways. So, we must ask ourselves if we only rejoice in the people we agree with, the ones we understand, those who look and act and prioritize the same things we do? Are our lives marked by the love of God that ALL others can see and feel, regardless of our differences? In this unsettled world, are our hearts at peace? ----We do live in troubled times, and I am not saying we should affirm behavior that threatens people's lives and safety, but our disagreements ought never lead us to lash out or isolate from others. If we are not experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in practical ways that shape our lives, push our comfort zones, and transform our relationships, it isn't because The Holy Spirit is absent. Jesus told us if we ask for the

presence of the Spirit, Jesus will glorify himself by answering that request. May we be a people who ask.