

“Burning Love”

Over the past two thousand years but especially in the first few centuries, Christianity has been a religion of appropriation. That is, we Christians have been known to see something in other faith traditions and taken it on for our own use. For example, prayer beads long predate the Christian rosary and ritual cleansing with water predates baptism. One of our first appropriations was the Jewish Feast of Pentecost.

Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish holy day of Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks. It is a thanksgiving for the wheat harvest. Pentecost was also one of the three pilgrimage festivals in ancient Judaism. People were obligated to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Like Passover seven weeks before, the city would be packed with people from all over the Jewish diaspora. As Luke writes, there were “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” People across the Mediterranean diaspora are mingling in the crowds throughout Jerusalem.

For these crowds the Pentecost celebration as recounted in the Book of Acts initially seemed to be like any other. Whatever anxiety that had surrounded Passover and the crucifixion of some insurrectionists had passed. While Jesus’ disciples are still hanging around in Jerusalem the Roman authorities do not feel they are worth the trouble to hunt down. The disciples have experienced several post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and most recently seen him drawn up into heaven ascending as if on a cloud. They are still not sure what to do. They have remained in seclusion praying for direction.

That morning they arose for prayers and breakfast. Outside the house they hear the city come alive as the pilgrims start to populate the streets. Then a powerful wind disturbs the disciples in the house, despite the fact the windows are closed. Then each disciple, male and female, has what seems to be a tongue of fire alight above their heads. Having previously been cautious about identifying themselves or going out in the crowds, they now fling open the windows and begin evangelizing the crowds.

When they speak however, they speak in many different languages. Each disciple is speaking in a way that the polyglot throng hears the Good News of Jesus Christ in their own language. This simple band of uneducated Galileans has had an instant Rosetta Stone experience and now is able to communicate perfectly across language barriers. The babbling of many languages still exists, the Tower of Babel story has not been reversed, but it has been overcome for the moment. Some in the crowd think the disciples are drunk and speaking gibberish. But that is not so.¹

Keeping Pentecost must not be the rote ticking off of a day on the church calendar. While it is fun to see everyone dressed in red, Pentecost is so much more than that. Marking Pentecost each year as we mark other Church feast days is more than an annual remembrance. It is a call to change and growth. Each year Pentecost, like Christmas or Easter, is an opportunity for each of us to live into a

¹ It is important to note that this was not an episode of glossolalia or speaking in unknown tongues. Each heard and understood what was said. Interpreters were not needed just good listening.

new phase of our Christian life. At Christmas we allow Jesus to be born again in the cradle of our heart. At Easter we open up ourselves to Jesus who has overcome death and welcomed us into new life, eternal life, in him. At Pentecost we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit who guides us, comforts us, advocates for us, and challenges us to speak the Good News of Jesus to the whole world, even when doing so is risky.

This year the gift of the Holy Spirit comes at a particularly difficult time. It is a time when we cannot gather in a single room like the disciples or go out into the crowds proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. Yet we are called and encouraged by the Spirit to find some way to proclaim Jesus to the whole world. The challenge this year is to use other ways of sharing the Gospel.

For more than two months we have been doing that via livestream, Zoom, YouTube and other electronic platforms. We are finding ways to share our faith and join together in faith virtually. Many Sundays more people have watched our services online than usually attend them in person. We have learned how to make donations online when we are not able to pass the plate. These are new ways to reach people that we will keep using even as we regather in the coming months.

There are also tried and true ways that we can and are using. We bring food to church for the hungry or take it directly to Seven Loaves. We care for each other by making phone calls and writing notes. We wear masks to protect others from this persistent and vicious virus. These are all ways Jesus said we can show the world we are his disciples, that is by the way that we love each other.

If we go away from this Pentecost unchanged, uninspired, and uncommitted to walk in love with Jesus then we have lost an opportunity. We are like the cynical ones in the story who thought the disciples were drunk, because their ears were closed to hearing the Good News. We are to open wide our ears and hearts just as the disciples took the risk of opening the windows of their hiding place. Fling them wide open and grasp the gift of the Holy Spirit. Allow the flame to burn brightly above your head and in your heart. Reach out in love to one another and speak the simple language of Jesus' love for all people where there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek where earthly distinctions no longer count because we begin to see as God sees and love as God loves, because the Holy Spirit is transforming us today and all the days to come.