

1 Sermon, May 27, 2012

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Acts 2:1-13

Title: "Easter Renewal: Pentecost"

How many of you have had an encounter with a Jehovah's Witness, trying to get you to think like them?

How many of you have had an encounter with a Mormon trying to persuade you of their beliefs?

Were they at all interested in *your* beliefs?

What about a Muslim?

If you'd grown up a Christian in Pakistan, you would have experienced Muslims trying to convert you.

When I went to Turkey seven years ago, we were invited to a Muslim group that followed the teachings of a recent Muslim teacher. They were interested in explaining themselves to us, but weren't particularly interested in what we believed.

There seems to be a limit to the amount of religious diversity many of us can tolerate.

It seems that there is a human desire, often expressed in religion, to have other people be *like us*.

Why is that?

Is it a good thing to want other people to be like you? Not entirely – but we want our children to have our values.

It is a sinful desire to want another person to be like you? Not entirely – but it can be.

The story of Pentecost says to me that the Holy Spirit wants diversity. The Holy Spirit wants there to be a variety of races, languages, and worldviews in the church.

There should be no racial or ethnic barriers to Christ's Church.

Yet Sunday morning is one of the most segregated times in America.

The workplace, the schools, the military are all a lot more diverse than the church. In the church, people with similar experience and similar background tend to lump together, making most congregations kind of ethnically uniform.

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God calls the church to be diverse, world-wide — but how far does that diversity go?

That was the context of our recent United Methodist General Conference, the every-four-year meeting of our denomination.

Because of the growth of the United Methodist Church in Africa, there were fewer representatives from Wisconsin, and the US in general.

The church worked hard to be racially inclusive, participating in “An Act of Repentance toward Healing Relationships with Indigenous Peoples,” which meant to apologize for our racist past in particular with Native Americans.

Our church has been trying for many years to start racial and ethnic minority churches in the US, and has been successful. These are signs that the Holy Spirit of Pentecost is still at work.

However, there were some kinds of inclusivity the church couldn't agree about.

There was much passion around the issue of homosexuality. Much discussion, but no change. The position of the church is that gays and lesbians are welcome to be part of the church, and serve in its ministries, but not as pastors. Pastors may not, according to church law, officiate at same-sex unions.

It's an issue about which it is hard not to take sides, and there was a lot of side-taking. In fact, people on both sides said they would leave the church if it didn't go their way. People on both sides point to this issue and say that's why the church is declining in membership. People on both sides point to the scripture to back up their understanding of inclusiveness or righteousness.

This was a challenge for everyone. For the delegates from Africa, it was a non-starter. Many African countries still have laws against homosexuality, in some cases punishable by death. In Africa, polygamy is much more accepted than homosexuality, because it has been practiced in Africa among many ethnic groups.

The General Conference wrestled with these things. There were no spin doctors trying to make the church look good. No coverups here.

That is, perhaps, the grace of the situation: that we are able to continue to be open and honest about our disagreements. We are able

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to love one another despite the disagreements – at least there's more love than in secular institutions.

So how does the message of Pentecost speak to us here and now?

At Pentecost, Jesus' followers were together in Jerusalem. And then the Holy Spirit came upon them, with a noise like that of a mighty wind, and something appearing to be like flame lighting up the heads of the disciples. The disciples spoke, and people gathered together from the four corners of the world were able to understand them in their own languages!

Notice what happened. God, through the Spirit, chose to meet the disciples where they were: in the midst of a multitude of languages and experiences. The Spirit translated the gospel instantly into many languages. If you think this is easy, then you have never tried learning a new language! You don't just substitute one word in one language for a corresponding word in another language. Language is messy and intricate. Language is rooted in a wider and complex culture and way of thinking and living. Even when we speak the same language, don't we still have a hard time understanding one another? Imagine then the miracle of Pentecost and what it means for us today.

God meets us in the messiness of different languages and does not ask us to speak God's language. Instead, God chooses to speak our many languages. God does not speak in a divine language beyond our comprehension. At Pentecost, God speaks in Aramaic and Greek and other ancient languages. Today, God continues to speak in Spanish, Greek, Hindi, and Chinese alike. God comes down to our level, not expecting us to have to come up to his.

Pentecost tells us that being Christian means stepping out of our comfort zone, getting a little more comfortable with diversity.

Diversity is upon us, whether we like it or not.

My son, Carl, is studying at Iowa State University, with a major in Global Resource Systems. It's a new major in the school of agriculture. To graduate with that major, you have to do an internship in agriculture in a foreign country, you have to take a foreign language, and you have to take a lot of courses in sustainable agriculture, soils, economics, and geography. You need to learn about the distribution of world resources.

Most of you have eaten grapes from Chile.

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You may also know that the corn harvest in Indiana affects the price of tortillas in Guatemala. The price of wheat in Canada affects the price of bread in Russia.

We live in a Global Society. More and more, we cannot ask other people to be like us.

Recently, the census showed that the majority of children now born in the United States are from minority, non-white populations.

More and more adoptions are from outside the US, like the Regos who are adopting three children from Ethiopia.

Often these trends make us feel uncomfortable. Yet they are not a threat unless they try to take away Christ. For Christians, it has to be about Christ: Christ's teachings, Christ's example, Christ's presence.

That's why some have been concerned about Muslim law coming into the US courts. Orthodox Jews have religious laws, too; and Catholics have canon law. We're not too concerned about these because they're familiar.

But Anti-Sharia law laws have been passed in 24 states. This is evidence of a culture clash, in which religious law is in conflict with civil law. Most of these cases involve marriage and child custody issues.

And while there are some Muslims who would like Islamic law to be the law of the land in the US, most US Muslims are happy to get away from Islamic Law and be in a nation where the rule of civil law is enforced.

The Holy Spirit is still at work in the diversity of our modern world. We now have missionaries to the US from places like Mexico and Korea and Africa. We have to give up some of our sense of needing to be the ones to go out and save the world, and realize that people around the world are also trying to save us.

In this global society, we will find our faith challenged just by the images that people use for Jesus and other religious figures. In religious art, the images for Christ seem less European. We have something to learn from that.

We have something to learn from the Greek Orthodox about imitating Christ.

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We have something to learn from the African church about joy in worship.

We have something to learn from the enthusiasm of new Christians in the Philippines.

But in the midst of this we must never lose sight of Christ, of his teaching and example and of his presence with us now.

Amen.