

Numbers 11: 24-30

Acts 2: 1-21

John 14: 25-29

All Together in One Place?  
June 4, 2017 – Pentecost Sunday  
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There is a phrase in modern American English usage: “I get where you’re coming from.” In other words, “I understand the emotional and psychological motivation behind your actions or words.” Or we might say, “I don’t believe in capital punishment, but I am a pacifist, so you know where I am coming from.” Not really good grammar, but...we use it, especially when we do not really agree. We are trying to say that we understand why a person has a particular opinion, even though we don’t share it: “I would have taken the dog to the vet, but...I could see where they were coming from.”

Sometimes this can be conveyed with a facial expression. Raised eyebrows and lifted hands, for instance. Sometimes by a inflected sound, like, “Huh.” As in, “I just got the 10 Commandments tattooed on my back.” “Huh.”

All this implies that there is a spatial quality to understanding: where are you coming from, where do you stand? And this is reinforced by our Scripture passages today. You have to be coming from the right place, or all together in one place, to be included in the outpouring of God’s Spirit. Or do we?

First of all, we need to locate ourselves in the biblical narrative to even understand what an outpouring of God’s Spirit might be. In the reading from the book of Numbers, we are in the wilderness following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Moses is leading the Hebrew people, who are very grumpy. Moses has received the Holy Spirit, but is feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of guiding this cantankerous group. God offers to spread the Spirit around a bit, sharing it out amongst 70 men. Even though it is all supposed to happen in one place, the tent of meeting, the free-flowing Spirit manages to fall on people outside. Joshua gets defensive, but Moses says, “Don’t worry, it would be fine with me if **all** of you got this gift!” To an exhausted leader, the gift of the Spirit means that authority is shared, and you don’t have to stand alone. For that time, in a leadership crisis, it was exactly what was needed.

In the reading from the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as an Advocate and a Teacher. It will guide the disciples once he is gone. In another verse, Jesus says that the Advocate will testify on his behalf, so that the disciples can testify. It is all about discernment, which in some way will bring peace and freedom from fear. Once again, the Spirit is not for a designated few, but a freely given gift to any who love Jesus and seek to follow him. For that time, that moment of separation, it was exactly the promise that was needed.

Then we get the Acts reading, the famous and dramatic Pentecost story itself. This time, the gift is expressed, not as authority, not as advocacy, not as peace, but as communication. Many languages spoken, many languages understood. I sometimes think that the listeners also got a measure of the Spirit, because the text describes both speaking and hearing. They knew where Peter was coming from, and he seemed to know where they were coming from: at least 3000 people

were baptized that day. The gift of the Spirit was about making communication possible. For that time, when the disciples needed to be kicked out of fear and hiding into courage and eloquence, it was exactly what was needed.

Now, of course, that first Pentecost after the resurrection took place in a world of divided opinions and sectarian strife. A lot like our world. But, somehow, in their period of prayer in the upstairs room, all together in one place, those 120 disciples found a core value of good will, even with their limited understanding, even in their fearful situation. And today, here we sit, making our way through difficult times we don't understand, some of us fearful, some of us distrustful, searching for that peace Jesus promised. Into our place and times, comes this festival day of the Holy Spirit.

Defense Secretary James Mattis was recently quoted in the New Yorker. He was asked what worries him most about his new role, what keeps him up at night. He said: "The lack of a fundamental friendliness. It seems like an awful lot of people in America and around the world feel spiritually and personally alienated, whether it be from organized religion or from local community school districts or from their governments."

Mattis was not locating the worry or the threat on the "outside." It was not about "them." It was about us, and where we are coming from. It is about alienation, and, perhaps, not being "from" anywhere, or "with" anyone. We are in need of a miracle, or an outpouring or some kind of gift of God to save us from this alienation, this unrooted-ness, this spiritual homelessness. We are in need of the miracle of Pentecost, whose primary feature 2000 years ago was breaking through the barriers of communication. People who could not understand because of language barriers, heard and understood, and God's message broke through to people who otherwise could not have heard it.

Did the miracle happen in the larynx of the speaker or the eardrums of the hearer? As I said, our text could imply either, but it is the action of the Spirit, and the need of the hour, that made something happen. That testifying Advocate was at work. Testifying, getting the truth across, communicating. This is the task of the Spirit and our task, in response to the Spirit.

As we know, when this does happen it can seem miraculous and exhilarating, because there are so many barriers to genuine communication, especially when it comes to communication about the deep issues of life and meaning and spirit. Jesus spoke many times about the difficulty of getting the message through. We have story after story of Jesus trying to get his disciples to understand what he was talking about, only to have them misunderstand again and again. He often used the metaphors of blindness or deafness for it, describing his mission as opening the eyes of the blind and the ear of the deaf. I imagine that Jesus was frustrated a lot of the time. Communication, especially once you get beyond the superficialities, is a tough job with a relatively low success rate, and even Jesus had only occasional breakthroughs.

Barriers and filters abound. What we want to hear acts as a filter, too or what we perceive as being in our own interests. Most of us are quite good at filtering out information that threatens our comfort zones or calls for change. Anyone who has engaged in sincere self-reflection knows how much effort it takes to stop defending yourself and start actually listening to things that call you to make significant changes. It's difficult, this work of knowing where you are coming from and knowing where the "other" is coming from. But we are all on a wilderness journey, seeking to be saved from the pitfalls and sins of the past, looking for peace and a home with God and neighbor.

Even those who have found a “church home” often feel a neediness and restlessness that calls for the guidance of the Spirit.

Brian McLaren, in his book: “A New Kind of Christianity” wrote:  
“I’ve heard stories of Catholics being saved from ritualism by becoming Pentecostal, Pentecostals being saved from emotionalism by becoming Presbyterian, Presbyterians being saved from rationalism by becoming Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox being saved from clericalism by becoming Baptist, and Baptists being saved from historical amnesia by becoming Catholic or Orthodox. Simple churches save people from complexity, and complex churches save people from simplicity. Political churches save people from an overly personal religiosity, and personal churches save people from an overly politicized religiosity. Exciting churches save people from boredom, and quiet churches save people from hoopla and hype. Around and around the cycle goes.”

All this makes me think that churches need to get their acts together, and to figure out the barriers they build between themselves and between the church and the rest of the world. We need to find a place of prayer and goodwill that might lead us to speak and understand. If I wanted to describe it dramatically, as the Acts passage does, I would say that we need tongues of flame to fall on us and burn through the barriers before anything is going to get through. We need the Holy Spirit to come like a howling wind, blasting the cobwebs out of our hearts and minds and breathing new life into our anxious and searching souls. If and when that happens, when the word gets through, either because the Spirit gave one of us different words or gave the other of us opened ears, then that would be Pentecost. And we are in real need of a new Pentecost.

Long ago, Jesus promised peace, but not the kind of peace that the world gives. It will not bring the multitude of opinions to a halt. It will never, much as we might hope for it, produce unity of thought. And, as with seekers through the ages, including the disciples in the Upper Room, we will each have our own experience of that presence, of what it means, of what puzzles us about it, of how our fears will be calmed. But we will be able, if we breathe deeply with the Spirit’s breath, to recognize in one another the striving towards good will, towards Christ’s Peace.

And so we continue to sing and pray for a measure of the Holy Spirit. We continue to pray that God will know exactly what is needed. We continue to share Holy Communion as a symbol of promised unity and love. We continue to pass to each other the peace of Christ when that meal is done, blessing each other with faith hope and love. We continue to be all together in one place: the loving embrace of God.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and rekindle in them the fire of Thy love. Amen.