

“The United Nations on a Field Trip”

Acts 2:1-4

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I don't think it was coincidental that the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised his disciples descended upon them at Pentecost. Jerusalem was filled with people from a variety of nations celebrating the time God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Luke was careful to list the participants' homelands so that his readers would know that the crowd came from all over the Roman Empire. They represented people from many cultures speaking different languages, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappadocians, Mesopotamians, Phrigians, Pamphylans, Lybians, Egyptians, Cretans and a half-dozen other nationalities. It was the United Nations on a field trip.

Why was this important to Luke? Why did he devote one-third of the space in this story about the origin and organization of the church to a listing of the nations represented and languages spoken? Was it to show how quickly the Gospel would be spread once the people returned home after hearing the disciples speak in their native language? Perhaps.

Did Luke have another reason? William Willimon, Chaplain of the Duke University Chapel, thinks so. He says it was because Pentecost represented the triumph of the Spirit over all man's differences. I'm intrigued by his idea and want to explore it.

It is true that all the people in Jerusalem that day were Jews, but they represented every conceivable ethnic, geographic and national origin. They were more different than alike, a point that Luke does not want us to miss.

What happened, though, when the Spirit descended upon the disciples assembled in a room somewhere in the city? Barriers came down as they went out into the streets sharing their faith in ways that people from every nation understood.

Luke tells us, “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked, ‘Are not all these men speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?’ ” Acts 2:5-7.

What is the Pentecost message for us this morning? One purpose of the Spirit in our lives is to help us transcend, if not break down, the artificial boundaries that we as humans create.

Sometime later, Peter discovered this while in the home of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Peter was led to this Gentile's home. While sharing the story of Jesus with Cornelius, his relatives and friends, the same Spirit that descended upon the disciples in Jerusalem during Pentecost was poured out upon Cornelius and all that were in his home that day. Immediately Peter ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus. Upon returning to Jerusalem, Peter had to defend his actions, which he did to the satisfaction of his critics for Luke recorded, “When they heard Peter, they had no further objections and praised God saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.’ ” Acts 10:18.

We live in the kind of world that Peter inhabited, don't we? The walls that separate us are getting taller and thicker. Many look upon those that are different from them with great suspicion and distrust. As a result, they stay within their comfort zone trading love with those that are like them. Seldom do they venture out to encounter those with different customs or dialogue with those that have other world-views.

What is the result of this bubble mentality and insulated lifestyle? Society is becoming more polarized and hostile as people take sides and attempt to eliminate everyone unlike them, turning them into villains and monsters.

I deeply appreciated an article I recently read by Lalor Cadley, "Beyond Who's Right and Wrong." She wrote, "Wasn't there a time when we saw our differences as a good thing, a sign that we were a thriving human community? Left and right, liberal and conservative, pro and con-we needed one another. No one saw all the parts of the elephant and it was out of the creative tensions generated by exploring our differences in a collaborative atmosphere that the best decisions came. It was the rhythm of these impulses, to conserve and to progress, that brought us to where we needed to be."

Continuing, she wrote, "These days, instead of celebrating our diversity and seeking to learn from one another, we line up, sharpen our opinions like sabers and go out to skewer those that disagree. Intelligent debate has given way to sticks and stones. Being right and making others wrong is all that matters."

I cannot tell you when I last heard a public discussion celebrating diversity. That would require seeing all people in God's image, valuing them as fellow human beings, speaking to them with respect and listening to the voice of God through them. It is hard to do these things through an imposing, impenetrable wall, however.

The best answer I've read to the age-old question, "Where is God?" comes from Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher and theologian. He replied when asked this question, "God is between people. He is found in relationships. God fills the space between us so that we are connected, not separated."

For me, this is the message of Pentecost. God came between people that day to bring them together. He's still trying to do this through the leadership of His Holy Spirit.

What is the Pentecost challenge for us today? Let me return to Cadley's article, "I don't want to give up being right, but neither do I want to play into the hands of whatever it is that drives people apart. If we want to work our way to a better place, perhaps we could begin by refusing to be lured into discussions where the only choice we have is to be for or against things. The issues we face are far too complex to be reduced to yes or no answers."

"What we need in these complex times is all hands on deck. We need the wisdom and energy of all God's people, left, right and center, working together to forge the best course. We must come together in a spirit of humility and charity, not giving up or compromising our beliefs, but not using them as battering rams either. We must practice the lost art of listening, with the understanding that when my turn comes the courtesy will be returned. Dialogue must go both ways."

The challenge that Pentecost and this passage present me this year is this. I am determined to find ways to communicate with those that come from different economic, religious and political perspectives along with those from different social, ethnic, geographic and national backgrounds. I'm coming out of my comfort zone. With God's

help, like the disciples at Pentecost, I am going to take the initiative to enter into others' lives and begin a dialogue about hope and healing, in their language, not mine.

I do believe that Pentecost represents the triumph of the Spirit over all our differences. I also believe that God is between people and that is where I want to be, building bridges instead of walls. Join me on this journey.