

Recognizing the Holy Spirit

Have you ever thought about how we recognize one another...I know that lately that has become more difficult...I mean when because of the pandemic we have been wearing physical masks over our faces...sometimes when we see each other in places we don't expect...or after an interval of time...it may take a while for recognition. I taught a class in the Presbyterian Leadership School by Zoom yesterday using on the topic of social justice. The title of the course was Matthew 25 because of the initiative launched by both the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Peacemaking Agency as part of a global outreach to expand our witness as Christians here and in the world. If you don't immediately recall, Matthew 25: 31-46 is the passage which also carries the subtitle in many translations at the judgment of the nations. In it, Jesus tells the disciples and the crowds that the nations will be separated on the Day of Judgment on the basis of whether or not they recognized him when they met him. Neither group knew they had actually encountered him during their lives, but they were judged based on their actions toward those who bore his image...his face within. They had either fed, clothed, visited or otherwise cared or ignored those folks. Today we commemorate Pentecost, the day that is celebrated the day the disciples received what they were told to go back to Jerusalem and await...the coming of the Holy Spirit. The way the scripture passage from Acts describes this event happening makes it abundantly clear that the dramatic effect, those dramatic changes in the behaviors of the first disciples and all those early church witnesses came from their life experience of God's presence in their life...that this experience was the work of the Holy Spirit. But somehow...if we think about...do we imagine that this powerful, radical changing of their life was what they imagined they were waiting for when they returned to Jerusalem after watching Jesus ascend into the clouds? The passages we have just considered in the last couple of weeks from Acts also make it clear that it was this entering of the Holy Spirit into their lives, this process of renewing all things...the ways in which they looked at all things...this vitality which was evident was the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, perhaps more importantly, the book of Acts presents this presence of the Holy Spirit at work as the norm for all the communities that claim to belong to the risen Lord...who claim the name "Christian." In his first speech in the public square, Peter announce that what had been proclaimed through the prophet Joel was happening...that God was pouring out God's spirit upon all flesh...upon all flesh. Our text from Acts begins "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." Embedded in this opening is the information that this day was already named Pentecost for the Jewish festival which occurred fifty days after Passover which required the faithful to journey to Jerusalem to make an offering of new grain, and first fruits—to come from wherever you lived. So this is the reason that there were people from all languages who were there in Jerusalem that day to hear Peter's message when the wind—the breath of God blew through the disciples and sent them into the public square aflame with the message to proclaim. The timing of the Jewish traditions thus provides the audience to hear the message and the power of the Holy Spirit gives the disciples the tools to give it. For we read in verse 6: And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." This is the book-end to the Tower of Babel where confusion reign because understanding was lost...here confusion happens because they do

understand: “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” Perhaps there is more than one lesson within Pentecost for us. Christians have often hoped for a time when our racial and economic differences would cease, when in Christ we would all be indistinguishable. Such impulses are earnest, but fundamentally misguided, because it means we value only those things that define us as a group and devalue those that define someone else as “other.” Many such interpretations emerge from a fervent hope that the specters of racism, sexism, and all the other myriad and destructive “isms” with which we have populated our world to define the “other” would no longer bind us to cycles of violence and hate. We are all children of God, but that does not make us identical. Nothing could be further from the truth. The story of Pentecost in Acts helps us to understand how God sees human diversity as one of God’s greatest gifts to the world. At Pentecost, God through the Spirit does not erase our differences but embraces the fact that God has made us all so wonderfully different. In the first chapters of Acts the disciples and those earliest believers find themselves regrouping and discerning what a life of faith together looks like after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. First they gather together in their tight little group, then suddenly tongues of fire descend upon them and this gift of the Spirit precipitates an extraordinary event. As the disciples emerge and proclaim the good news: EVERYONE hears the good news proclaim in their own language...God has chosen to meet us where we are: in the midst of a multitude of languages and experiences...instantly translating the good news into myriad languages...native tongues...not just translating but giving the meaning so it is understood...which if you have ever tried to master another language you know is not exactly the same thing. Perhaps Pentecost offers us a lesson we need to learn about differences...that the problems we face across the various cultures today are not our differences but the fact that when we imbue those differences with prejudice and rank them, when our differences become a way to determine who is “in” and who is “out”, who is “acceptable” and who is “unacceptable”, who is “better” and who is “inferior”—then we are corrupting God’s gift of difference instead of appreciating the beauty it gives. These prejudices that infect our relationships with one another are toxic poisons that only lead to hatred and destruction. We also need to set aside the idea that these differences are “problems” to be solved as that abolishing of differences which God created and accepts is just as harmful to those whose “difference” we demean as rank prejudice for they both work on the same logic. It is better to be the same than to be different. For Christians, nothing could be further than the truth. But setting aside this desire to be with those who are like us...to be totally accepting of the different...as those first believers found...it was a challenge...the coming of the Holy Spirit into their lives was disruptive...not just on that festival day...but on many other days as it sent them on journeys to places their traditions taught them were unclean...to eat things and meet with people their traditions taught them were unacceptable...yet the Spirit took them there. The passage from Acts for today is paired with the vision that Ezekiel had of the valley filled with dry bones which was a metaphor for the people of Israel who had abandoned God’s ways and were spiritually dead. This vision that is described is very dramatic, like the description of the coming of the Spirit in Acts as this also portrays the power of the Spirit...the breath of God. In Ezekiel’s vision it is promised that God’s people will receive new life through God’s spirit. The prophet calls to his people in his time to have new hope in their exile through this by reminding them that God doesn’t accept death as the final word. As we move beyond the Easter season we need to keep reminding ourselves of this truth: God never accepts death as the final word.

God keeps sending his breath into the world to remind us of that truth. And the most compelling truth is that God is love and that love wipes out all differences between those whom God loves if we but look and see God's face in each other and recognize the indwelling of the Holy Spirit among us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.