

Pentecost

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Pentecost C 2013, 19 May 2013

Acts 2, Psalm 104.26-36, Romans 8.14-17, John 17

During a recent ecumenical gathering, a secretary rushed in shouting, "The building is on fire!"

The Methodists gathered in the corner and prayed.

The Baptists cried, "Where is the water?"

The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings.

The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring the fire was evil.

The Roman Catholics passed the plate to cover the damage.

The Jews posted symbols on the door hoping the fire would pass.

The Congregationalists shouted, "Every man for himself!"

The Fundamentalists proclaimed, "It's the vengeance of God!"

The Anglicans formed a procession and marched out.

The Christian Scientists concluded that there was no fire.

The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson who was to appoint a committee to look into the matter and submit a written report.

The secretary grabbed the fire extinguisher and put the fire out.

This seemed a particularly good joke to tell on Pentecost since it is all about a fire emergency and church disunity. It is of course the great question and problem of the Christian faith—The relationship between our diversity and our unity. You might say it is the question and problem of our culture—our pluralism that exists under a commonwealth.

It is certainly an issue for every community of individuals like this one of St. Philip's. How do we live with the tension of our individual differences and our need to get on together and get on with the task of proclaiming Christ in word and deed? How do you stop the things that destroy unity?—like oneupmanship, comparing yourself against another person, judging others, the misuse and abuse of power, gossip, backstabbing, self-righteousness, pride, laziness and being opinionated? I could go on but you get the picture!

The problems that beset our Christian communities are not new and were ones with which the early Christians struggled. Yet, the Christian community is meant to be a gift, a great gift that enriches and blesses. This Pentecost celebration is all about the blessing of community. It is what the Holy Spirit does—blesses us so we may bless others.

Paul, the writer of our epistle reading knew how enriching a community could be and so he was very concerned about the things that divide and cause tension. Paul in the letter to the Romans assures us that we are in fact, in our very being, one family. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we are all adopted sons and daughters of God. I always think this is a very comforting picture and very unifying, but not particularly helpful. In my family growing up it wasn't what we had in common that was ever the problem, it was our differences. In other parts of the New Testament Paul is more helpful with this. His overriding theme is that although there are many different gifts there is only one Spirit that activates them all and all these gifts, these differences are of equal value.

Paul lists the gifts in various places in the New Testament, not always the same list, there are additions and subtractions. But what Paul wants to drive home is that no gift is better than the other. It is wonderful to have someone who is wise in the congregation but it is just as important to have someone with knowledge—who knows where the linen and vessels are and

how to clean them for example.

You need people who know what works in the community and what doesn't. It is great to have someone who has the gift of healing—you know those people who by their very presence impart peace and wholeness—but it is just as important to have people who are prophets, who make us uncomfortable and uneasy with the way things are. And we certainly need contemplative people of prayer. So many gifts, so many activities and services, are important for the community. Phoning people during the week to make sure they are OK. Doing the flowers, cleaning the church, keeping the grounds clean, smiling at strangers in the street, writing letters to those in power, speaking up for those who can't—you get the picture.

Paul also uses the concept of activity as gift of the Spirit and they too are important. Our worship is an activity, our prayers, our getting up and turning up and joining in is an activity. I assure you just your very presence is important for the wellbeing of the whole community. And not to forget Paul makes the critical point that all the gifts are as nothing if we do not have love.

So I wonder, what your particular gift, service or activity is??

How do you find out what it is? How do we receive these gifts? How do we put ourselves in a position to be open to the Spirit, to be activated by the Spirit? Or is it more the case that the Holy Spirit somehow pours into our head some special gift or insight and we have nothing much to do with it? Like we are some empty vessel. One day we are crabby and judgmental and then 'whoosh' like magic we become serene and compassionate. One day we are petrified of speaking in front of a crowd and the next minute we are the world's greatest preacher.

Well it is not like that. There is a theme that runs through both the old and new testaments. It is that the power of God is in your heart already. I'd like to say that again, the power of God is in your heart already. The prophets say, "The word of God is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance". Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is within you". Spiritual growth is not a matter of searching 'out there' for what or who you are supposed to be. It is already 'in there'. We already have the seeds of the gifts of the Spirit within us.

Scientists tell us that every living organism has within itself, at the very first moment of existence, all the chemical and physical patterns that will give rise to the development of full growth. What is laid down in our human cells is that we are made in the image of God. The process of life simply unfolds the story that is already written into the initial cell. Perhaps it is more helpful to talk, not of human beings but human be-comings. Each person is a 'be' on the way—constantly coming into existence. At conception we can talk of a 'human be-coming'; at seventy years of age and beyond we can still talk of a 'human be-coming'.

Our task is to embrace and assist that God-given process of 'coming-to-be'. You know this hand will never be repeated again. These fingerprints are forever unique. There will never be anyone exactly like me in the history of the universe. As lovers of God and creation it is part of our job to help other people to find their unique voice, the unique expression of their being, so that they may grow into the fullness of maturity if Christ and be themselves a source of goodness and blessing. It is our job to nurture this giftedness of their unique being.

When Jesus promised that his Spirit would be with his followers he also breathed on them the gift of peace. My peace I give to you he said. The peace of Christ is ours if we live in his love, in love to one another. His peace comes when we are able to hold together our diversity and differences, our unique voices, when we see ourselves as part of one family and people. His peace is ours when we see difference as a blessing and a gift. His peace is ours when we open ourselves to his Spirit and see in each other the unique, never to be repeated wonder of God's creation, a unique gift that is to be a blessing for all. For that is the critical thing. Paul writes

that the Spiritual gifts are for the common good and by definition for the common good of the wider community. That really is the measuring stick about any gift and when and how we use it—will it enhance our common good—not my good, your good, but the good of all of us? Our common good is what ensures the spiritual health of all of us!

I have one more joke: A preacher was invited to speak at the local church. The church was full including the choir stalls behind the preacher. The congregation wanted to welcome and support the preacher so occasionally someone would say ‘amen’ or ‘alleluia’. The preacher preached his twenty minutes and continued on despite allotted time. He preached for 30 minutes, then forty minutes and then for an hour. He even continued for an hour and ten minutes. Finally, someone sitting on the front row took a songbook and threw it at the preacher that was still going strong in his message. The preacher saw the songbook as it was hurled his way and he ducked. The songbook hit one of the singers sitting in the choir section. As the man was going down, you could hear him say, “Hit me again, I can still hear him preaching!”