

The Dream of Pentecost
Pentecost Sunday, May 28, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

There is a word you have to speak ... and a word you crave to hear.

Earlier this month, I went on pilgrimage in England with my colleague group. Nine of us, all Episcopal priests, traveling together on foot for 84 miles.

Now, when you travel as a group like this, you become a bit of a curiosity. Perhaps especially so in a place like England that has been shaped so much by a church that is still enmeshed at least formally with the state ... but where more than half of Brits say they don't belong to any religion ... twice the rate as in the U.S.

One morning at breakfast, a man named Michael started chatting us up, as often happened. When we asked him what he was doing that day he said, "Actually, I'm getting married.... to a lovely woman named Caroline."

Well, we're nine Anglican clergy, we joked, bring her over and we will do it right now.

And then we got more serious. We asked him what time the wedding was, and we told him we would stop on our journey at that time and pray for them and their marriage.

And then Michael paused and became very solemn. And really a hush came over the room.

And slowly, with a great deal of purpose, like he was reaching down to touch something deep inside him, he said softly:

"I am a man of no religion."

And then he fell silent again. He fell silent for ... it had to have been about 30 seconds, which may not seem like a long time ... but 30 seconds is a really long time when you are waiting for someone to speak. And in that silence with us looking at him and him looking at us, gradually, his eyes began to fill with tears.

It was one of those moments of deep vulnerability that make you want to take your shoes off because you know you have stumbled on holy ground.

"I am a man of no religion." He finally repeated. "But Caroline has a faith that is deeply important to her. So, if you would say a prayer for her, I would deeply appreciate it."

As he said these words, a trickle of tear spilled out of the corner of one of his eyes.

The pain he was in ... pain that somehow we could tell was linked to some wound religion had wrought on him in the past and was compounded by his inability to share a faith that so clearly mattered to one he loved so much , pain that he had risked feeling by coming up to this group of clergy and letting us have just a peek into his heart ... the pain he was in was palpable. It spilled out of him and into us.

It was a Jesus moment, where for whatever reason this man was trusting us with his pain and vulnerability even though we represented the very institution, I can only imagine, that had caused him pain.

And I wanted to honor that and honor him ... and I also wanted to give him a sense that love does heal and that there was love and healing out there for him. And so, I said, "Of course we will ... and we will pray for you, too."

"No." he immediately snapped back, shaking his head vigorously as if my words had attached to him and he was trying to throw them off. "Do not pray for me."

And then he paused and got softer, "But please, pray for her."

And chastened, we assured him we would.

And he wiped his eyes.

And we wiped our eyes.

And we parted, surely never to meet again.

And yet, I have been unable to shake that moment.

It is two weeks later, and Michael has become a fixture on my heart.

His face.

His trembling voice.

The deep pain and deep love.

Andre Henry once said in this space that for us to take the police seriously when they talk about reform they had to at least have as much integrity as Domino's Pizza.

It's a great line ... and it makes perfect sense. Several years ago, he explained, Domino's Pizza came out and said, look ... we've been making really bad pizza. You know it. We know it. So let's just come clean. And here is how we are going to try to do better and we want you to tell us how we are doing.

It's really the same with the church.

There is a cruel irony that a church whose central narrative is the good news of love's healing power has been one of the deepest and most consistent wounders in human history. And if we want anyone to trust us that we are trying to be different, we need to at least have as much integrity as Domino's Pizza and admit it.

And not just say that "other churches" have done this but not us. But to say, hey ... this is us.

There is a [St. Barnabas Episcopal Church](#) in northwest Pasadena specifically because black people were told you are not welcome here at All Saints Church.

And even today, we get it wrong a lot. I'm not saying we try to hurt each other ... I don't believe we do. But we do hurt each other. Of course, we do. We are human. And we really need to just admit that.

So yes, we hurt each other. And yet we – each of us humans -- are beautiful creatures of hope and resilience. And so, still we come baring our hearts and our wounds as much as we can stand – whether it be in a place like this or a breakfast table with a strange group of clergy -- hoping against hope that maybe this time the word we need to speak will be heard and the word we need to hear will reach our ears ... and our heart.

I used to only say it on Christmas and Easter, but I've taken to saying it every Sunday I do the announcements and that is I know that some of you are coming into this community after being wounded by the church or in the church in the past. Wounded by the church denying who you are or refusing to honor your voice or insisting on participating in systems that continue to do you harm.

And I want to name the incredible courage and hope it takes for you to come in here – be it in person or online. And our deep desire to honor that courage by meeting you in love. By being a place where you can hear the word you need to hear for healing and where you can speak the word you need to speak for the healing of us all.

And again, it's not just other places.

Some of us have been hurt in this place.

Some of us are continually hurt in this place.

All of us bring our wounds into this place.

And yet still we come, not out of a sense of masochism but as a testament of hope.

We are beautiful creatures of hope and resilience. And so, we stand in silence, our eyes brimming with tears, sometimes unable even to imagine a prayer being for us much less God's love.

And yet we come in hope that this time, maybe, it will be different.

That maybe, this time, what happened at Pentecost can happen here.

Now, most of us know the story of Pentecost ... we tell it every year and we just heard it again. And we even tell it in many different languages at once to drive home the central point – that there were people from many nations, and each heard the Gospel being spoken in the language of their heart.

Now, I want to pull a couple things out of this story ... and maybe these are things you've noticed and maybe you haven't.

The first is pretty obvious. I mean ... it's literally right there in the text: "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem devout Jews from every nation under heaven."

The work that the Holy Spirit does in Pentecost. The work that birthed and defined the church and still defines us today cannot happen if all we are doing is gathering in groups of people who are just like us.

Now this was challenging for them, and it's challenging for us. Because it's always easier to be around people we are like than people who are different from us.

That's not news. And that's also why whenever there is a dominant group the natural tendency is for them to impose their culture, language and preferences on everyone else. To prioritize their own comfort and because they are so used to being centered, not even to be aware that it is at the expense of the comfort or even safety of others.

And ... in the extreme ... to demonize and even wound or kill those whose difference makes them feel either uncomfortable or who highlights the places in them where they are different, places they fear because they know what happens to people who are different.

This is why some of the most hate-filled anti-lgbtq rhetoric comes from people who themselves are queer and they don't know how to love themselves so they turn their hate outward to others.

Now ... we know that one dominant culture isn't what God has in mind for the church. And we know it from what happens next in the story.

Because the Galileans here were the dominant church culture ... and yet what the author of Acts tells us is

“Now at this sound the crowd gathered and was confused because each heard them speaking in the native language of each.”

So, this is big.

This was revolutionary.

You see, the native language of the Galileans was the same as Jesus’ native tongue – Palestinian Aramaic. The expectation would have been ... like Hebrew for Jews or in the written Sanskrit for Hindus ... and later Arabic for Muslims ... that in order to access the sacred, you had to learn the special sacred language. So, you would think the miracle of Pentecost would have been that. That all of a sudden, all of these people from different lands could understand Palestinian Aramaic.

But that’s not what happened.

Instead, each heard in their own language. Every language, every custom, every culture was the language, custom and culture of the sacred.

Now, let’s keep unpacking this. Because it gets even better.

When we think about everyone hearing the Gospel in their own language, I bet most of us think about what we heard this morning ... a cacophony of tongues where everyone was saying the same thing but in a different language. Kind of like when we say the Lord’s Prayer each of us in the language of our hearts.

But that’s not what hearing the Gospel is like. You see, the Gospel is literally Good News, specifically the good news of God’s healing love. And that means the Good News for it to mean anything has to match up with whatever the woundedness, whatever the bad news is in our lives.

I’ll give you an example. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus met Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, on the road to Jerusalem. Now Jesus didn’t hand Bartimaeus a sandwich, because the bad news in Bartimaeus’ life wasn’t that he was hungry. In fact, to make extra sure, Jesus even asked Bartimaeus – what would you have me do for you and Bartimaeus said, “Hello ... excuse me ... blind here ... would love to see.” And so, for Bartimaeus, hearing the Gospel in his own language was hearing those words of loving healing and receiving his sight.

That’s what happened that Pentecost morning ... not that everyone heard the same chapter and verse in some UN-esque simultaneous translation, but that everyone heard a word of healing love that corresponded perfectly to the wound they were carrying.

And what we know about healing is that for a wound to be healed, first the pain has to be felt. And when that happens, sometimes it is the pain that takes center stage and sometimes it is the joy and relief of healing.

I am convinced this is what happened because what happened next is that onlookers assumed the people were drunk.

Now I don't know about the drunk people you've been around, but my experience is they are not beatifically speaking in flowing tongues. People get drunk in a whole bunch of different ways.

There are loud opinionated drunks,

sloppy "I love you man" drunks,

wailing sad drunks,

dancing happy drunks,

raging angry drunks

... you name the emotion or response to pain and joy and there is a drunk who will put that on steroids.

So, when the onlookers say, mockingly, "they are full of new wine" it's not because they are witnessing a multilingual poetry reading. It's because they are witnessing an emotional tire fire. Because that's what happens when a whole bunch of people get together with wounds they have been unable to show and feelings they have been told they are not allowed to express and suddenly they are told this is a safe place to dance and cry, to wail and to heal.

That is the church that was born that day, and that is the church we are still groaning in labor trying to bring into being. That is God's beloved community.

And it is so, so, so hard.

Because here is the thing about pain ... here's the thing about all the places where we need healing ... and that is the complicated relationship between pain and empathy.

First, when we are in pain, it can be more difficult to hear and have empathy for the pain of others. Hell, it's hard enough for us to have empathy with ourselves a lot of the time. Now, this is literally brain chemistry. When we are in pain, our whole being focusses on the wound ... often to the exclusion of anything else.

And so, if church is the place we go for healing – as it should be -- the temptation is for us to be hyper aware of our own pain and woundedness and less aware ... or even unaware of others'. That doesn't make us unfeeling or bad people. It's literally how we are wired.

However ... for whomever has the power to shape the identity and culture of a community, the temptation is to shape it in a way that tends to the wounds and preserves the comfort of those in power. Which is what has happened for 2,000 years of church history.

And ... that's not Pentecost.

Because there is another piece of our relationship between pain and empathy ... and that is when we have been through pain, as we are able to heal from it, it increases our ability to empathize with the pain of others and be part of their healing.

That is the dream of Pentecost. And that is the dream of the Beloved Community God is gathering here at All Saints Church.

And it is hard work ... and it is amazing work.

Because for each of us, there is a word we have to speak ... and a word we need to hear.

And yet sometimes those words don't mesh together. And that's a challenge.

And if the word you have to speak is how proud you are of your sister who is a police officer and how you depend on the police to help you feel safe, it can be really, really hard to hear someone else say that same system of policing keeps them in fear and makes them furious at the injustice in the system.

And if the word you have to speak is celebrating how much marriage and children has both been an ideal and a saving grace for your life it can be really, really hard to hear someone celebrate that they have found the same depth of love and intimacy in being single or childless or outside of marriage or even in a polyamorous relationship.

And if the word you have to speak is, say, how much the stained glass windows or a certain style of preaching or a certain style of music are the balm that gives you healing from the wounds in your life it can be really, really hard to hear someone else say that those same windows, or preaching style or music are not healing their wounds but are actually like scrubbing them with a Brillo pad.

And yet this is where we do that hard and amazing work of speaking courageously and listening deeply. Of growing our capacity for compassion and empathy so that we can be the community of healing for everyone of which God dreams.

That is the church. That is us in all our glorious messiness. And it is both the challenge and the joy of this day and this community.

Because there is a word you have to speak ... and a word you need to hear.

And each of us comes here ... standing in silence, tears in our eyes, hoping to have the courage to say the word and hoping beyond hope to hear the word that will be balm for our pain.

And we get to come together and try to trust. Try to trust that this is the place where each of us gets to speak the word we need to say and each of us gets to hear the word we need to hear.

And we get to listen in love to each other. To grow our hearts of compassion and empathy. To hold each other through the pain and dance together in the joy. And to grow to the point where we get as much joy and relief from hearing each other's wounds and being a part of each other's healing as we do our own.

Blessed be the wound that brought you to this place.

Blessed be the story you have to share.

Blessed be the ears you have to hear and the arms you have to embrace the other as they do the same.

And blessed be the love that will heal us all. Amen.