



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Overcoming Divisions

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
May 23, 2010

Today is the Feast of Pentecost, the 50th day of Eastertide. We celebrate today in the Christian liturgical calendar the power of God's Love otherwise known as the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the truth that when you and I give the Holy Spirit sway over our competition, ambition, pride, and egocentrism, the Spirit shows its power to overcome divisions - divisions in language, culture, religion, theology, and ideology.

You have just heard read the Bible's account of the Pentecost event celebrated by the Church. (Acts 2: 1-21) No one knows exactly what happened in this and many other Bible stories. What is really more important to me is the "invisible event" (William Sloane Coffin) that took place in human hearts that morning. What was going on internally in those disciples that resulted in such a public demonstration of the power of God's spirit coming like a rush of wind, helping those disciples to do greater acts than even Jesus had done (according to what Jesus himself predicted in this morning's gospel. John 14: 8-17). 3,000 people were converted in one day. No wonder Pentecost is considered the birthday of the church, which we will celebrate with birthday cake and live jazz on the lawn after this service – and the children who are in children's chapel are getting birthday hats as we are here worshipping. What was the invisible event that took place 2000 years ago in the hearts of those gathered?

I believe that Pentecost didn't happen just once. Rather, Pentecost happens any time you and I open ourselves to the power of God's Spirit who is always seeking to overcome the divisions in our lives.

What was the invisible event?

I think some light is shed by a story I have not been able to get out of my mind since I read it last December. My friend, Kim Rosen, author of *Saved By a Poem*, was visiting a rescue center for Maasai girls in the Rift Valley of Kenya. In order to be protected from mutilation these girls are protected in this safe house. Each girl in order to get there has to leave her family and community. All fifty of these girls had traveled for miles barefoot over rough roads, spending nights hiding under the bushes for fear of being found by wild animals. The youngest girl there was 9, having been rescued in the midst of a forced marriage to a 42-year old man.

On the evening of her arrival, my friend, Kim, heard beautiful singing coming from the kitchen. She went over where a group of girls was cooking cornmeal and cabbage over an open

fire. One of the girls asked Kim if she knew any songs. Kim said that what she really loved was poetry.

Immediately, an older girl looked up from behind a huge cauldron of steaming cabbage and said, “I write poems.” Kim asked her to recite one of them. The girl said she was too shy to do that. So Kim volunteered to recite a poem. “May I recite a poem to you? Then maybe afterward you will want to recite yours to me.”

As soon as the girl nodded in the affirmative, my friend, Kim panicked. She thought, “What poem might these girls relate to?” She poured through the archives of the poems in her mind. Not one seemed remotely appropriate. Her life experience and their life experience seemed so different.

Meanwhile, the kitchen had become strangely silent. The clatter of washing and cooking had ceased. The whispering and giggling that had been a constant soundtrack in the background was quiet. All the girls had stopped their work and were waiting for Kim’s poem. (Kim Rosen, *Saved By A Poem*, pp. 203-207)

Out of nowhere Kim thought of Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Journey.” Without rehearsing it she began to recite it. “One day you finally knew/ what you had to do.”

The poem goes on to describe the necessity of leaving home, turning away from the many voices that demand that you stay, risking the anguish of those who seem to need and love you, and walking alone into a wild night in order to save the only life you can save.

The girls in that makeshift kitchen listened, transfixed. Each of them had lived through such a turning point in their own life when they had to leave their tribal village and go to safety. Each of them, at a very young age, had defied tribal tradition and left her parents, friends, and community to save the only life they could save – their own. They understood these lines from the depths of their soul.

What I consider to be a Pentecost experience then took place in that kitchen in Kenya. Here a white, middle-class American woman speaking words written by another white, middle-class American woman, surrounded by Maasai girls who had grown up in tribal villages in Kenya, in families so poor that the two cows their parents would get when they gave their daughter to an old man in marriage were their only hope of a better life.

All separation dissolved. Kim writes in her book, “We were transported into a timeless, placeless, languageless realm where we were the same. By the end of the poem, tears were running down my face and several of the girls were crying as well.” Several of them dove toward Kim, wrapping their arms around her waist. There was a long silence. Then the tall girl who had earlier said she wrote poetry asked, “Who is this woman, Mary Oliver? Is she Maasai?” Kim shook her head, barely able to speak. “American,” she whispered. *Mzungu*. Like me.”

“How did she know about my life” the girl asked. And then she said she was ready to say her poem.

When I think of this contemporary story in Kenya I think of the story of 2000 years ago in Jerusalem where people of different languages had come together and all of a sudden they were all able to understand one another. The invisible event that took place in the human hearts must have been this. These are the words I take from Kim’s book:

“When you speak words that are written in the language of your soul, you become a voice for the heart in the world and everyone around you is blessed by a sudden grace if you speak the language of your soul. If the word, “holy,” means the cracking of the mind’s shell to let in the direct experience of a reality beyond it, any language can become a holy language.” (p. 207)

Mary Oliver has written, “If you speak your words with love and you feel the ferocity of that love, the fish explode into many.’ Loaves of bread multiply. Water turns to wine. Territorial lines drawn by blood, color, culture, and creed are erased. The veil between the visible and the invisible dissolves in a flood of wonder.” (p. 207)

Many theologians have reflected on this, the feast of Pentecost this morning, being a reversal of the Tower of Babel story in Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 11: 4-8).

In that story, the human race lived with one language until they decided that they could become God. They built the Tower of Babel. As a result of the desire to live apart from God instead of in communion with God and with one another, God destroyed the tower as a symbol of competition and arrogance and then God created all the different languages of the world. Their attitude had been, “Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and *make a name for ourselves.*” William Sloane Coffin writes, “Such an enterprise always ends in confusion and a scattering of the people. Activity rooted in pride can only divide, it can never unify, for pride is not accidentally but essentially competitive with God. (William Sloane Coffin, “The Flame of Creativity vs. The Fires of Sin,” (5/26/85), *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years*, Volume 2, p. 279)

The effort to do life and to be holy on our own steam without one another AND without God is always a dead end enterprise.

You and I live in a very divisive time. Polarization and division are notably preventing us as a nation from cleaning up our pollution and bringing an end to racism, homophobia, occupation, poverty, and war. For us to be people of Pentecost, overcoming divisions we must become more deeply than ever before instruments of God’s Spirit.

And what I mean practically is this. At last Saturday’s consecration of two new bishops for the diocese of Los Angeles in Long Beach, prior to the laying on of hands all 3,000 of us who were gathered in that arena sang an ancient hymn in Latin - *Veni sancti spiritus*. Come Holy Spirit. We sang it over and over and over until the leader of the singing intuited that we had elevated over competition, pride, ambition, and egocentrism our common desire for the Holy

Spirit to use us for sacred work. Rather than an act of magic, it was an act of soul, of love and gratitude – an act of opening one’s life to be a conduit of the Spirit in everyday life.

Whenever there is a division, my friends, whenever you experience a division between other people, in your business, in your group, in your family – Pentecost calls us in our own unique way to practice a commitment, a habit if you will, a habit of saying to God, *I will be an instrument of the Holy Spirit in this situation to overcome division. I want God’ Spirit, the Power of Love, to be stronger in my being than competition, arrogance, pride, and egotism.* And whenever you and I do that in the most humble mundane of ways we have done something as miraculous as the Sunday of Pentecost in Jerusalem 2000 years ago.

The Holy Spirit is experienced as love, a love that surpasses human telling, and because the Holy Spirit is Love, God’s Spirit does not divide as does pride; God’s Spirit, Love, unites. The deepest need that you and I have this morning is to be in relationships both with God and with one another across divisions, and Jesus is our model. He excluded no one, not the poor, not the rich, not the many groups of social outcasts of his time. Therefore, we in our time must be no less inclusive. (William Sloane Coffin, “The Flame of Creativity vs. The Fires of Sin,” (5/26/85), *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin; The Riverside Years*, Volume 2, p. 282)

Last Saturday night when I got home from the consecration in Long Beach, my son and the love of his life, Julie, were home cooking dinner with my wife, Hope. We four then sat outside and ate a beautiful candlelight dinner on the patio. Hope and I asked them to tell us about their cross-country trip from the District of Columbia where they had been living to Los Angeles. They began by telling us that when they were in New Orleans they had gotten married. [laughter/applause] Without the benefit of church or synagogue (she is Jewish) but they had gone to the most romantic spot in New Orleans, Algiers Point, where they had first met. They went to a judge, a lady by the name of K.K. Norman who calls herself the “Love Judge.” [laughter] They had asked her to go out on the porch through the French doors, outside the Judge’s courtroom, and to marry them overlooking the crescent bend of the Mississippi River, looking over into the French Quarter. Hope and I were thrilled.

Because they and we are not going through the conventions that you go through when preparing for a wedding, all the announcements, parties and engagement parties, we are having to create our conventions and rituals ourselves. So the other night we had Julie’s mother over for dinner at the same table by candlelight on the patio and in a deep, soulful moment we heard about Julie’s mother being the daughter of two survivors of Auschwitz. Soul speaking to soul, speaking the language of the heart of the world, breaking through the shells of the mind to let in a deeper reality that we all need.

So I wrote to some of my rabbi friends to tell them how moved I was and how speechless I had become when we were speaking of the Holocaust. One of them wrote back with a “Mazel Tov” and said, “By the way, how perfect that you discovered this on Shavuot, Jewish Pentecost. Because on Shavuot we celebrate the revelation of God’s love that overcomes division.”

This morning's collect prayed that you and I would become what scriptures call "preachers of the Gospel – the Good News." What I think that means in non-churchy terms is that in daily life you and I are called to speak in the language of our soul. That is the invisible event which took place in Jerusalem and in a Kenyan kitchen and on a Pasadena patio. When we speak words that are written in the language of our soul we become a voice for the heart in the world and everyone around us is blessed by a sudden grace. If the word holy means the cracking of the mind's shell to let in the direct experience of a reality beyond it - any language can become a holy language and any moment can become a sacred event.

May you and I say Yes as we now baptize these children into the power of the Holy Spirit - understanding that our job as godparents and as sponsors is to speak the language of the soul to them so that they with us and with God can be Pentecost instruments of turning the human race into the human family.

Amen.