

As we observed the Feast of Pentecost this past Sunday, I was reminded of the wonderful reversal that is a part of the Pentecost story. Peter and the other disciples are in Jerusalem for the Jewish celebration of Shavuot. Along with the disciples are people from all across the Ancient Near East. Different languages, ethnicities, and commitments. According to the story from the book of Acts, the sound of a violent wind filled the room, and what looked like tongues of fire rested on the individuals in the room. People started speaking in tongues about the works of God. Rather than confusion reigning, people from those various points in the Ancient Near East instead heard the message in their own language. They were able to understand. The major reversal that this story juxtaposes is the myth of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. There people seek to build a tower to the heavens and to see God. However, God has other plans. God introduces different languages into the mix, the people cannot understand one another, and the building of the tower ceases.

The Holy Spirit and Pentecost have always seemed a bit strange. If trying to discern what the Holy Spirit says from moment to moment isn't enough to challenge you, then, perhaps, tongues of fire might up the experience. Nevertheless, the core message of Pentecost is that God's message of grace and justice in Jesus is expressed *for all and* articulated in a way that all can understand. Which is a pretty powerful message when you get right down to it. So much of our efforts in life--and particularly in community--are thwarted because we cannot understand one another. We suffer from the division of Babel rather than the unity of Pentecost. Moreover, the unity that is found in the diversity of that Pentecost moment is a marker of our life together. This is clearly one of the signs of God and the spirit of God afoot in the world. We do not divide into tribes or nations or cliques. We coalesce in our difference around a unitive promise of life: life in God and life for all.

To say that the Church over time lost sight of this marker of our being is an understatement. From disagreements in the early first century, to power grabs after Constantine converted, to the Great Schism between the East and West in 1054, to the alphabet soup of Reformation groups, to modern day discord and wrangling around conservative or progressive or whatever the next category might be, we have not lived necessarily well into that unitive promise while respecting our amazing diversity. I trust that our efforts to understand are further hindered by the deluge of information and misinformation that washes over us daily. Who and what do you believe? What are reputable sources? What is true (not just capital T true but in-reality-small-t-true)? And how do we manage the various opinions and ideas within our own person let alone in community? Ultimately, how do we create, cultivate, and cherish communities that seek understanding?

Well, like religion and spirituality themselves, it is a practice. We need to work at this endeavor to understand.

Many of you are familiar with the distinction that textual critics make between a hermeneutic of understanding versus a hermeneutic of suspicion. It's always a helpful review, and it certainly is a part of the understanding practice. Hermeneutic is simply a fancy word for interpretation. The textual critic seeks to engage the narrative from a place of trying to understand what is being said and the author's intent, rather than dismissing the work offhand because of any number of skeptical readings. For us as a community in Christ, the same is very much true. Our practice of life together is vastly enhanced when we engage from the hermeneutic of understanding rather than suspicion.

As we prepare to return to in-person worship, perhaps, this can be a helpful frame. It might be very easy to second guess the deliberations of a committee or group that we were not a part of. It may be tempting to look at protocols and wonder what purpose they serve and who made them up. It may even be frustrating to think that we could be much further along in this process if only (i.e. If only we had acted sooner. If only we had followed the science more closely. If only we had more courage. Or any number of "if onlys"). However, the hermeneutic of understanding forces us to work to figure out the complexities others are managing, to suspend suspicion for a moment while living into an understanding of what protocols might mean, and to remain patient. Also, understanding often involves asking questions. Please know that I am always available to talk about what we are thinking and what we are doing and to respond to any question you may have.

The bottom line is that we are in a transition moment much like the early church was on that day of Pentecost. Jesus had ascended, and the fledgling community of his followers was beginning the discernment of what life, worship, and community would look like without him. We are discerning what life, worship, and community looks like post-pandemic. May we use the Pentecost model as a guide. As we continue to discern where the Spirit leads us, let us take heart. The core message of our life together is that God's message of grace and justice in Jesus is expressed *for all and* articulated in a way that all can understand. Thus, it allows for us to coalesce in our difference around a unitive promise of life: life in God and life for all.