

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

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Pentecost Sunday with Baptism

In recent years, there have been many studies, reports, books and articles, about the nones. Nones meaning the religiously unaffiliated, the NONEs, the people who when asked to check off a box for their religious identity, check "none." There has been much wondering, and hand-wringing about these nones, because church attendance has been going down since the 1960's, and how are we gonna attract these folks back into our pews?

I have to admit that all these books and articles annoy me. I mean, what are we, a type of entertainment, an industry that needs better marketing to attract customers? The conversation just seems so low-ball.

But I've been realizing that there's another aspect of this dialog about the religiously unaffiliated that just doesn't sit right. We are equating nones with low church attendance, when these are two issues, issues that are overlapping for sure, but they are not the same thing.

One way we know they are not the same is that the data show, and we know from our friendship circles, that there are plenty of folks who do deeply identify with a religion, with a specific denomination even, yet they never or rarely come to church. Our own stewardship committee has been getting their own data on this group, reaching out to St Martin's members who have drifted away, listening to their stories and hearing about why they are not coming any more.

So it's not only the unaffiliated who don't come to church.

And also, not everyone in churches, not everyone in this church, identifies in the same way. Within our own St Martin's community, among people who worship here together on the regular, are people who don't identify as Episcopalians, some who don't necessarily identify as Christians, probably even some who check "none" on forms asking their religion. Some of us are unsure about what happens to the bread in the Eucharist, or have problems understanding the Trinity -- maybe that last one is many of us! There are folks among us who have questions about bodily resurrection, who stumble when they say the Creed, or who don't say it at all.

There is a diversity of identity and belief within our walls, a diversity within the group that practices our faith together. We are Episcopalian and Lutheran and Quaker and Presbyterian and Evangelical and Catholic and Unitarian and ex-this and recovering that and multiple belongs and not-sure-what-we-are-and-believe but just trying to work it all out together.

In this way, we are not so different from the early Church as described in today's reading from the Book of Acts.

In our first reading we hear that there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. Some of these diverse Jews are likely living in the Holy City, and some are probably pilgrims who have come to Jerusalem for the Pentecost, the Festival of Shavuot. They speak many different languages, and just like Jews today, they likely have a diversity of beliefs and practices, they have different ways of living into their identity as Jews.

We also hear that there are proselytes in the group, preparing to become part of this worldwide Jewish community. And there are likely some simply Jewish-curious folks hanging around as well, interested in hearing more about the God of Israel, or just attracted to the celebration.

It is into this mixture of people that the Holy Spirit comes down.

The Holy Spirit comes down, and like a heavenly Google translate, the Spirit allows the people to hear what the disciples are saying, each in their own language. The Spirit comes to each person assembled and reaches them in a way they can understand.

Now today, on this Pentecost Sunday, we will call the Holy Spirit down to bless water as we baptize Agnes. We will baptize Agnes in the name of the mystery that is the Trinity, and we will affirm our faith by saying the Creed and renewing vows that take a lifetime to understand and a lifetime to live into.

Through baptism we will welcome Agnes into the community of Jesus-followers, we will welcome her into this St Martin's community. The Book of Common Prayer says, The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble. The bond of baptism is indissoluble. It cannot be broken. No matter where Agnes goes, no matter what she does, no matter if she lives as a lifelong Episcopalian or goes on to check "none" for the religion question, no matter what, Agnes will always be a part of us. No matter what happens, Agnes will always belong.

The same is true for all of us, baptized or not. Because God is always reaching for us. The Holy Spirit is always ready to come down on us, to speak to us in our own language, to reach us where we are. The Holy Spirit comes to us no matter what we believe or don't believe or are just not sure about. The Holy Spirit comes to us even if we don't feel worthy. The Holy Spirit comes even if we are not ready.

The Holy Spirit comes in times of joy, to make us dance and shout. The Holy Spirit comes in times of exhaustion, when we think we cannot go on, but the Spirit comes, and we can, and we do.

The Holy Spirit comes to us in this time and place, in this Memorial Day weekend when we think about the sacrifice of those in the armed services and our hope for peace, when we think about peace but there is still war, in Iran and Gaza and Ukraine. The Holy Spirit comes to those facing Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to those grieving over the mosque shooting in San Diego. The Holy Spirit comes to all the helpers, all the grieving, and all the sick, in those places and everywhere.

We cannot escape from the Spirit's reach. Once we feel the Spirit, it is like a fire that cannot burn out. It is like a bracing wind. It is like streams of living water. Once we are marked by the Spirit, we are part of everything and everyone. We are a part of each other. We belong. And nothing can take that from us.

Agnes, we welcome you into this community of people just trying to figure it all out. We welcome you into the Body of Christ in all its diversity. And we thank you, for reminding us that we all share in the same Spirit. Amen.