

“Melting pot or mosaic?”

Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2010

Acts 2:1-18b; 21, John 14:8-17, Romans 8:14-17

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Happy birthday to us!

Pentecost Sunday is frequently referred to as the birth of the church, when the Holy Spirit descended from heaven to empower the followers of Jesus,

gathered in Jerusalem.

This is the eighth Sunday of Easter.

It is the 50th day after Easter, and thus the name Pentecost.

The Eastern Christian churches have a different calendar than Western Christian churches.

It happens that this year Pentecost falls on the same day in both calendars.

So Christians around the world today are celebrating the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples, empowering them and birthing the church.

That is what the Holy Spirit does.

To steal a phrase from Garrison Keeler, it gives us

“...shy people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done.”

It transformed those gathered in the upper room from a huddle of fear to a rowdy rabble proclaiming God’s deeds of power.

This beginning of the church was immediately diverse and multicultural.

The coming of the Holy Spirit pushed the Gospel of Jesus Christ out beyond the Jewish world of Jerusalem

to be heard by people from “every nation under heaven”.

The community exploded, led by the Spirit of God.

This new, expanded and Spirit-led community, has some distinctive characteristics.

In our gospel text from John 14, Jesus promises that the Spirit will come, but specifies to whom it will come.

Beginning in verse 15 Jesus says,

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

And I will ask the Father,

and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”

Jesus identifies his community as those who live as his disciples, those focused on glorifying his Father, making God known to all people. The idea of community is one that we in Mennonite circles are pretty familiar with.

We use the word a lot.

In fact, if you pay attention to your bulletin every week, you will be familiar with these words.

“Park View Mennonite Church is a community of communities who worship God and follow Jesus by the power of the Spirit. Each community and its members participate in God’s saving, healing, and reconciling mission in our world, our neighborhoods, and our church.”

That is our vision as a congregation, it is what we strive to be and to do. There is a focus on worship and discipleship – following Jesus, and there is a focus on participating in God’s mission in the world. What it **means** to be a new community formed by the Spirit is where the challenge lies.

How does your Sunday School class, your small group, your commission or committee, your book club or supper club, meet this vision?

What shape does your community take?

What shape does our larger community, our congregation take?

We may have some of the same challenges that the people of Acts 2 faced with Pentecost.

I’ve already noted how the new community that began to form with the coming of the Holy Spirit was diverse and multicultural. This began a long process of struggle for the early followers of Jesus to determine how to define who was in and who was out. Following Jesus was for Jews initially, then it was also for Gentiles who agreed to follow Jewish custom,

and then in Acts 15 leaders in Jerusalem agreed separated following Jesus from obeying the laws of Moses.

Romans 8:14-17 says that this Spirit we have received is a spirit of adoption,

bringing us back into God's family.

The community created by the Holy Spirit is a community of God's children.

The multiple voices of Pentecost are a sign of the breadth of the new community,

encompassing everyone.

That is, of course Good News.

We are a part of the "everyone" brought into this inclusive community.

Our sins, our moral and ethical failings,

are forgiven and forgotten as through the Spirit we commit our lives to Christ.

We are adopted back into the family of God.

And through the workings of that same Spirit

we are empowered to change and move beyond our human failings.

So we are molded into a body,

a community of Jesus-lovers who come with all sorts of backgrounds and experiences.

2000 years of church history tells us that is no easy task being this body!

As I thought of this challenge

I was reminded of my social studies lessons back

when I was in my middle and high school years.

Growing up in Canada we looked at the cultures of Canada and the United States.

I remember being taught that in the United States

a melting pot approach was taken when assimilating immigrants.

It was expected that newcomers to the nation

would blend into the dominant culture and cut off ties to their homeland.

Canada's approach to immigration had newcomers maintain

more of the heritage of, and connection to, their country of origin.

These cultural pieces were then welded together

to form a cultural mosaic of unique parts that shape the whole.

As I recall, both of these approaches had strengths and weaknesses,

although my suspicion is that because it was a Canadian education, the mosaic was presented as more appealing than the melting pot.

Perhaps a more fitting way of looking at Christian community is to use anthropologist Paul Hiebert's model

of **bounded** and **centered** communities.

A bounded community has firm boundaries

and clearly distinguishes insiders and outsiders.

You are either in or you are out of the community.

A centered community is not so concerned with who is in or who is out,

but with whether people are moving toward the center,

toward the core beliefs and convictions of the community.

For the church, that would mean

moving toward living a life of discipleship to Jesus

and pointing others toward relationship with God.

This centered approach probably fits most closely with current

Anabaptist thought,

although the bounded approach is very much our history.

With a strong center of discipleship to Jesus,

we can have a more open outer edge

that allows us to reach out and be mission-oriented,

interacting with others and inviting them to join our community.

But sometimes we gloss over the hard work of community.

We have, even in the renewed and Spirit-led community,

a tendency to let our human nature define things.

We struggle with knowing what it means to be an inclusive community,

and I recognize that even saying "inclusive community" can create alarm.

How loosely or narrowly do we define our core values?

What if people are not moving toward the center,

or are not (in our opinion) moving quickly enough?

Is there a point at which we have to say "No, you are not a part of this group?"

Phil alluded to this last Sunday as he talked about our proclivity to splinter and separate.

There are all sorts of challenges to being a community

where the Spirit of adoption is at work.

How we look,
the color of our skin,
the language we speak or the accent we speak it with,
do we say foy-er or foy-eh (hopefully not that one),
the understanding we have of the authority of the Bible,
how we worship,
what music we sing,
how much money we earn and how we spend it,
all of these might cause us to question whether we can be in
community.

In fact, I think that there are times
when we really are hesitant to want to deal with the hard work
of living out this Spirit of adoption.
It makes for some hard times in the body!
Not infrequently we look at our history and shake our heads at the
failures we see,
failure to see God's Spirit working in diversity.
But we don't always fail.

Some years ago, before I moved here,
Virginia Mennonite Conference was faced with the issue
of persons in the military who were coming to Mennonite congregations
in the Norfolk area. Could they become members of these congregations
when a core Anabaptist belief involves Jesus' teachings on peace,
and on calling his followers to be peacemakers?
I would have liked to have been an observer of the process that evolved
as committed lovers of Jesus wrestled with this question.
Here the mission-oriented nature of the community was attractive and
effective,
but was coming into conflict with the discipleship values at it's core.
Reaching out to persons in the military
and encouraging them in their relationship with God
is following the call of the Gospel.
Allowing persons in the military to be a part of the church
might water down our peace witness,
might cause change to our core values.
What if "they" challenge us

and push us to abandon our commitment to peacemaking as a
discipleship issue?
But what if "they" help us to clarify what we believe,
and enrich our understanding of discipleship?
Somehow, Conference leaders, with the Spirit guiding,
came to a conclusion that our congregations
can accept as members persons in the military,
even while we continue to teach Christ's call to be peacemakers.

Within the Harrisonburg District of Virginia Mennonite Conference,
there are a number of new or developing congregations
that are drawing in persons who are new to faith in Jesus,
or who come from Christian backgrounds other than Mennonite.
In these congregations – and in ours - the challenge is present each week
to welcome people with a diversity of belief
while encouraging movement toward deeper discipleship.
Some of these congregations have dropped Mennonite from their church
name
because they feel it is a barrier to newcomers.
Some explore new ways of being church, new ways of worshipping.
Some explore ancient forms of worship
or seek to emulate the early church community practices.
In these ways they are seeking to strengthen their core of discipleship
as they engage in God's mission.

This is the church that we are a part of,
a community that is empowered by the Holy Spirit
to live as disciples and engage in mission and ministry.
Our human nature works against this,
and would have us live in a spirit of slavery to fear.
We might fear others. We might fear change.
We might choose to want our church to be a melting pot
where people come and become just like us.
But the Spirit at Pentecost announced its arrival with a multitude of
voices.
Everyone in the world could hear
and understand the good news of Jesus Christ.
That Spirit calls us into a community that represents a mosaic.

The pieces of the mosaic are formed into a body pleasing to God.
With the help of the Spirit we can reach out and welcome new friends,
in Jesus' name, as our hearts are warmed with love.
“Well met, dear friends” is #102 in Sing the Story.
Let us join together and sing this invitation,
on our birthday,
for the Holy Spirit to continue to guide and empower us in this new
community,
the body of Christ.