

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

Transcript of sermon from the 10:00 service on Sunday, May 20, 2018 (The Day of Pentecost), by the Rev. Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

I love the day of Pentecost because it reminds us that God's intention for the church is that it be a place of community between people of different languages, cultures and ethnicities.

When we hear the story of Pentecost read in multiple languages as we did this morning, it reminds us of the diversity in our midst -- a diversity that has its roots in the very first days of the church. .

Forming Community between people of different languages, cultures and ethnicities can be hard work, and it's not something that really comes very naturally to us as human beings. Left to our own devices, we tend to associate and gather with those who are like us: who look like us, who talk like us, who think like us -- and so without God's intervention the church would have looked very differently. .

Even Jesus during his lifetime was convinced that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. But along the way, these foreigners from the surrounding lands kept elbowing their way in, determined to get closer to Jesus: the Canaanite woman, the Syrophoenician woman, the Roman centurion. All these Gentiles broke into what had previously been a religion centered on one ethnic group. And by their faithfulness, by their determined faith, they showed that God's power and presence and activity was not limited to the people of Israel. They too had encountered God and they too were drawn to Jesus. And so partly because of his interaction with those people, Jesus began to open the doors wider and wider, ultimately coming to welcome even those people who were considered Israel's enemies. .

But notice what's happening here on the day of Pentecost. It says the disciples are "gathered all together in one place." But who are these disciples who are gathered? When they begin to speak, the scripture says those gathered said, "Are are not all of these speaking Galileans?" So the disciples who were gathered together in one place were actually a pretty homogenous group. They were all Jews and they were all Galileans -- from the same region of Israel. Where was that Syrophoenician woman, where was the Canaanite woman, where was that Roman centurion, if the disciples were ALL gathered together in one place?

Well, despite all of the interactions that they had with the Gentiles during Jesus's time, the community of Jesus' followers still hadn't quite gotten the message that the Gentiles were to be invited to be included as one of us. They still thought, "Oh, the Gentiles, right? They're, you know, they kind of liked Jesus ... that was okay, but they're still Gentiles and we're the chosen people and so they're over there and we're over here so we don't gather with them." But when the Holy Spirit came it pushed those Galilean Jews out of their natural tendency to gather only with those who were like them and it swept them out into the streets where they began to encounter people who spoke other languages, people they didn't share a culture with, people they didn't share a language with. And the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak to those people in their own language, showing that this message was meant for a much broader audience than a small group of Galilean Jews.

But even still, even after this experience of being able to speak in different languages, Jesus's

followers who were gathered at Pentecost, those early Jewish Christians, continued to preach the message only to their fellow Jews. The first few stories in the Book of Acts talk about them going out, "Our fellow Israelites. Listen to what we say. Jesus is the promised Messiah." They're speaking in the language of the people of that sort of the religious language of the people that they were already a part of even though they had had this experience of speaking in different languages they were speaking, as the scripture tells us, to "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" not non-Jews, but devout Jews and so they continued just as Jesus had at the beginning of his ministry to preach and teach in the synagogues, to the people of Israel.

But the Holy Spirit didn't allow that division to last because God's intention for the church was for it to be a place where we form community between people of different languages, cultures and ethnicities. And so one day as they're preaching to the synagogues, Peter hears the Holy Spirit calling him to go to the home of Cornelius, a Roman soldier. And Peter is a little confused by this, because we all know of course that Jews and Gentiles don't associate with one another, and a Jew would never be seen in a Gentile's home, eating with them. But the Spirit was telling him he needed to go there. And so he listened to it, even though it went against everything he had been taught, even though it made him uncomfortable, even though it took him to a place of uncertainty.

He followed the Spirit, and when he got to Cornelius' home he found that Cornelius had also been spoken to by the Spirit, and the Spirit had nudged him to reach out to Peter to invite him to come to share the message with them. And when Peter began to speak to the Gentiles that were gathered in Cornelius' home, suddenly the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they began to speak in other languages, just as the Jewish community had on the day of Pentecost! And so even though the scripture tells us that "the circumcised believers" -- that is, the Jewish Christians -- were astounded that the Holy Spirit had come "even on the Gentiles," this experience convinced them that they could not continue to exclude the Gentiles from their community, that the Gentiles were meant to be part of the community with them, that they too had received the Holy Spirit, just as the Jewish community had. .

It's kind of difficult for us to understand really and completely how radical this shift was, because the church became ultimately a place that is populated mostly by Gentiles and all of us (unless we have Jewish heritage) are descendants of those early Gentiles. And so when we hear the story about taking the message to the Gentiles it's sort of like, "Well, of course!" We're talking about ourselves. "Of course the message was supposed to come to us, right? I mean why wouldn't it? We're the church. It was always meant to come to us!"

But think just for a moment about a group of people that you find it difficult to see God in, a group of people that you think represent the opposite of everything that we are called to do and to be as Christians. And now imagine that the Holy Spirit has fallen even on them.

This tendency to create an "us" and a "them," to "other" people, is a natural human instinct. It isn't limited in any way to the Jews and the Gentiles of ancient times. We've seen it across continents, across cultures, and across time, whether it's Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land, or Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, or slaves and slaveholders in the American South, or housed and unhoused people here in our own community. We have a tendency to create an "us" and a "them" to put up walls and barriers, to say, "We're part of this group and you're not."

Those people in each of those opposing groups would probably be very unlikely to admit to one another that the Holy Spirit could fall on that other group. But it has! The Holy Spirit is about the business of breaking down barriers, of breaking down those walls that we set up artificially between us, and helping us to see that God's intention for the church is that it be a place where a community is formed between people of different languages, cultures and ethnicities.

So what does this mean for us here at St. John's? We have in our midst already people whose first language is not English, but German, Spanish, Swedish, Aramaic. And we heard them speaking to us this morning in their native language. Do we embrace and celebrate these differences among us or do we tend to sort of gloss over them and maybe not talk about them very much? Who else might we be called to form community with who is different from us?

Who else might we be called to go out into the streets to encounter, to learn from, and to form community. When we gather for the Eucharist in our circle around the room I invite you to look around and notice who is not here. Who is not yet a part of the community at St. John's who we could invite to share with us in this message, so that we can learn from, encounter, and build community with the rich diversity of God's creation. Amen.