

Pentecost Sunday June 4, 2017

Dissolving Walls

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14th Century Dominican tertiary, Scholastic philosopher, theologian and mystic Catherine of Siena is attributed to having written: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.

Beautiful words. But not so easy to live into. Being who God wants us to be is not easy to discern nor to put into practice; and often there are numerous obstacles, challenges, and other means of dissuading or discouraging people from living into God’s dream for them, a dream that, according to St. Catherine, involves setting the world on fire. Sometimes, before anyone can fulfill God’s dream, first they have to overcome. Thanks be to God, they do.

Sometimes, it isn’t fire that clears away the obstacles people face, sometimes it is water.

Perhaps you are already familiar with the story of a little girl who was born both blind and deaf; unable to talk, barely able to communicate and then only the basic of base necessities. Her parents feared for their daughter who lived in a sightless, soundless world of her own. Her inabilities meant she was cut off from those she loved, she could touch them, but had not real way of communicating what was behind the touch. Her inabilities meant she could not delight in the beauty and wonders of the world around her, or share her thoughts with her family. She did not know if the cake she was eating was in celebration of her birthday or some other holiday or even that it was called cake. She couldn’t be warned to stay away from potentially dangerous places because she could not see or hear them. It’s hard to imagine such painful isolation, and how hard that isolation must have been on both the child and her family.

Teachers tried to break down the barriers causing that isolation, but only one found a way to wash them away completely. Maybe you’ve heard the story about the day Anne Sullivan, a teacher who suffered poor eyesight herself, was walking with her student, a young Hellen Keller, determined to find a way to break down the walls surrounding the deaf and blind little girl. The water pump in the yard gave her inspiration. And she poured water into Hellen’s little hands as signed the word water in Hellen’s hand. And that is all it took; the cold wet water in her hand and the word came together forever washing away the barrier between Hellen and the world into

which she was born, enabling Hellen engage the world and do what she needed to become what God called her to be, an author, political activist, and lecturer who did her part to set the world on fire, thanks to a woman who helped fan the flame with a fire, a calling, of her own.

This story of Anne Sullivan and Hellen Keller shows how Jesus' call to those who thirst to come to him for that living water that flows from a person's life we heard in our Gospel reading is no different from the fire Catherine of Siena talked about and the fire that represented the Holy Spirit in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Both the fire and water that is the Holy Spirit can dissolve the walls and barriers that keep us from each other and from God.

Dissolving the barriers is sort of the unspoken event in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard this morning. Did you notice that our reading began with the apostles, those followers of Jesus, all together in one place? We don't know where that place was, we heard it was in a house; which means they were behind walls, separated from whatever was happening in the streets outside those walls.

Then we heard that amazing description of the Holy Spirit coming among them in wild winds and something that looked like tongues of fire. We don't know if that meant they were literally hot and destructive or warm and inspiring. It's tempting to imagine what it might have felt like, or sounded like or looked like, but the author of Acts didn't really go into that; instead they jumped to the part about the languages. Suddenly the apostles were speaking real languages of real people; languages they hadn't known before, languages they spoke well enough to be heard above the sounds of a busy city and to be understood by those for whom those languages might have felt like being at home in a strange land.

How did the apostles get from that windy, fiery, Holy Spirit filled house to the bustling streets of Jerusalem? I don't know. The text doesn't tell us. But I think it is significant that they went from being together behind walls to being in the streets, with others, speaking to those they hadn't met in a language they didn't know. Because those things indicate the walls or barriers separating them from the people of the city were dissolved, leaving the apostles free to use their new skills to tell people about the amazing works of God through the person of Jesus Christ in a way the people they were talking to could understand. Even more than understand, they were first offering a type of hospitality that was inviting and welcoming, and potentially was the real barrier breaker that opened a person's heart to being able to hear and receive the apostle's message.

In many Episcopal parishes around the world, it is a custom or tradition on Pentecost Sunday to have the day's Gospel read in many languages. This liturgical practice is intended to make the events from Acts feel a little more real, and perhaps touch on what it might have felt like or sounded like all those years ago on the streets of Jerusalem. I've participated in this many times. It can be astoundingly beautiful to hear many different languages being spoken around you. But if you don't understand the words, it can also sound like a cacophony, a loud garbled noise that is far from the Good News of God because you can't understand a word of it.

I wonder if in our zeal to make the day feel more real, we inadvertently create an experience that makes it easier to sympathize with the critics who wrote off the barriers coming down as drunkenness. I wonder if instead what really happened was the people who felt like they didn't really fit in, or were just cogs in a wheel, or lost in some way or searching for something or missing a home they left or some other way we humans can feel all alone or alienated in the middle of a busy city or in our lives, suddenly heard a sound they could connect with when they heard words they recognized, and felt that someone somewhere was not only talking to them, but wanted to talk with them. It wasn't just a welcome, it was a form of acceptance, of meeting a person where they were. And that is what is powerful enough to melt away the bubbles we human beings can put ourselves in.

Today, instead of reading the Gospel lesson in all the languages some of us can speak, but not all of us can understand, Gio graciously proclaimed the Gospel with me in Spanish, because that is his native language. And it is a language some of us, but not all of us, can understand. For a few of us, that Gospel proclamation in Spanish might have sounded familiar, like home, while for most of us, it was the English version that we connected to. It was my hope that we could try something different in order have a shared experience of hearing words you have to work to understand to hearing words you don't have to interpret and feel a barrier come down.

I wonder if that is what the presence of the Holy Spirit is, at least partially, about: breaking down, washing away, or burning away the barriers that keep us in bubbles that prohibit us from being what God means for us to be. We hear a lot about these bubbles in the public discourse today; and how it is so hard to communicate, have conversations and relationships with those who look different, think different, or have different political views. But this is nothing new. We can see such bubbles in the Old and New Testaments. And we can also see moments, like in our reading in Acts, when those bubbles popped.

On this year's celebration of the feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate not just the presence of the Holy Spirit, but the ways the Holy Spirit can inspire us to overcome the challenges like barriers and bubbles to create bridges and relationships with people so that we can, like the apostles before us, tell the story of God's love in Jesus, which is God's love for all people, perhaps we could ask ourselves, how is the Holy Spirit calling us to get out of the bubbles of our comfort zones to show people God's love?

One way I believe we are seeing the Holy Spirit call us is in the invitation we have received from St. Luke's Episcopal Mission in Merida, Mexico. You can read the details in David Burton's excellent article in Good Shepherd's weekly enews, but let me briefly remind you St. Luke's is a parish that feels lonely and isolated in its religious life and yearns for fellow Episcopalians to share their faith journey with. They want friends. Not money or tools, just companionship. And responding to their invitation with a yes is a way of diminishing barriers and supporting each other. It is also a way to meet our new friends where they are, getting to know them without telling them what they must do, and therefore learn from them, and letting them share in our hopes and dreams and struggles too.

Another way the Holy Spirit may be calling to us is to reflect on the ministries we are already doing well; such as Wednesday Free Lunch and what is good about that ministry: such as offering a safe place, hospitality, and grow it into something that aims to further meet the growing secular community around us where they are. To be a place where we can meet people who may never have been to a church, or who have been hurt by a church, to listen to them, and show them that Christians don't look like the caricatures they might see on TV, to let them see you as I see you: people who love God, who are curious, willing to try new ways to share God's love and who very deeply want the people who pass by this building every day to know God loves them and cares for them.

How to do that is a challenge. Perhaps an answer to how to meet that challenge is in the invitation my husband and I received from the Diocese a few weeks ago when we visited a church whose campus ministry is a café where people who have no church connection can have a darn good cup of coffee, free Wi-Fi, quiet time, a place for conversations, and if they want, conversation with parishioners and ministers who are happy to listen and share their faith with the curious. You can read more about that in the ENews too.

Both invitations could be ways we can live into what God means for us to be, a people and a place that shares God's love with the world. Both invitations are going to

take a lot of prayer and some time and work, and I ask your prayers for these callings. Both will have their own sets of challenges, challenges we can face together, with God, and both can be holy ways of dissolving the walls by meeting people where they are, of being what God means us to be, so that we can, as St. Catherine of Siena said, set the world on fire with God's love.