

“Us”

Acts 2:1-21

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In recent years, the two churches I have served as a parish pastor have experienced the surprising phenomenon of an influx of young adults into their ranks. Some are new to the faith (One called me one day to ask, “Joanna, what is Lent?”), but most are returnees. Having left for a variety of reasons ranging from disinterest to disdain, they are coming back hungry for community, searching for meaning, for ways to serve, and for a grounding for their lives and their children’s lives in something greater than themselves. In short, they are after what all human beings are after—the experience of God.

I try to convey the good news of Jesus Christ to them Sunday after Sunday using language and images, that, I hope and pray, have relevance to them in their time and place, as well as my own. As Clarence Jordan put it, “We want to be participants in the faith, not merely spectators.”

This past Pentecost, as I began to prepare my sermon on the familiar Acts 2 text, it occurred to me that Luke’s extraordinary story might not only be unfamiliar to many members of my congregation but might also seem arcane in the extreme. What follows is my attempt to communicate the splendid possibilities announced in the text in such a way that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, at least some present just might believe them or begin to believe them, or, at least want to believe them as they love and toil and yearn for authentic community in the broken world in which they live.

In his poem, *New Life*, Soviet exile and Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky invites his readers to use their imaginations:

Imagine that war is over, that peace has resumed its reign. . .
[Imagine] that a window frames not a town’s rubble but its
rococo, palms, magnolias, pine trees, tenacious ivy, grass, laurel....
Imagine that epics shrink into idylls. That words are but the converse of
flames’ long tongues of that raging sermon which used to devour
your betters greedily like dry wood.
That flame found it difficult to determine your worth, not to mention warmth.¹

The poet asks us to imagine a new life. It is an invitation not dissimilar to that which churchgoers receive on any given Sabbath day. Imagine a new way of being, we are invited. Enter into the world the story tells, into the realm of God’s truth. By the power of the Holy Spirit, allow your imagination to be reshaped, your reality reconfigured to reflect the possibilities that are called into being by the Spirit of truth.²

On this Pentecost Sunday, the bickering, bitterly divided world we live in is frighteningly incongruent with today’s Pentecost text, which makes the astonishing claim that people who are genuinely different from one another can come to understand one another.

Will Campbell, the crusty theologian and battle-scarred ambassador to the Ku

Klux Klan, once put it this way: "I tell people they're already brothers and sisters, and they ought to go out there and act like it! If we can't accept the gift of reconciliation, then we will never be free, but if we can receive it, then we will be free. There ain't no need to hate anymore. Getting the word around about that, that's [the] job"³ of the Christian church. The cross offers not only redemption. Its equally valuable gift is the gift of reconciliation. It is the essence of the new reality: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all one in Christ Jesus."⁴

It takes imagination to believe a thing like that. In fact, you have to hand your imagination over—lock, stock, and barrel—to the Holy Spirit even to begin to believe a thing like that, because at any given time there are two realities vying for our imagination. There is the reality we know, the seemingly intractable estrangements and divisions that mark the human community, and then there is the reality of the will of God, whose Spirit makes peaceful coexistence, even sometimes genuine understanding, possible among people who are as different from one another as they can possibly be.

The point is not to make everyone *like* everyone else. The point is not to have us speak the same language, some sort of spiritual Esperanto. That is not the story Pentecost tells. Cretans were Cretans, and Arabs were Arabs, but they *understood* one another. Galileans could understand Romans, and Romans could understand Galileans: "In our own language we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."⁵

The unsettling part of the Pentecost story is not that eschatological mythology that has the sun turning dark and blood and signs of smoke in the sky. The *really* unbelievable part is the first part—the part that claims that, through the power of God's Spirit, people who are not like one another can be in community with one another. Some were "amazed and perplexed" but were, at least, willing to consider that these things were possible; but others decided, no, these things cannot be. They must have gotten into the muscadine wine.

The truth is that we live in a world that is deeply divided in Pentecost 1994—a world divided over politics, a world divided over religion. Christians fight Muslims, Catholics fight Protestants, Croats fight Serbs. Remember the anecdote that was told after World War II about the refugee in war-torn Europe who was looking for a safe refuge? He went into a travel agency, and as he turned the globe around with his finger, he asked poignantly, "Don't you have anything else?"⁶

Unless we take a space ship to Saturn, this world is the only world we're got in which to raise our children and live out our faith and listen to music and sail a boat. It is our obligation, it is our business, our *job* to believe that things do not have to be the way they are, that ugliness and meanness and hatred and prejudice and misunderstanding among people are not the only possibilities.

Last spring at Trinity Presbyterian Church, the Community Relations Commission of the City of Atlanta held a forum to which all the parties involved in the debate over turning a portion of a heretofore privately owned apartment complex into public housing were invited. I do not believe that, in all my years of living in Atlanta, I have been present at an occasion that was marked by a deeper lack of trust or a more frightening level of misunderstanding. No one listened to anyone else. In a church whose chief characteristic is a spirit of graciousness and civility, it was a stunning contrast.

We're going to have to work it out in Atlanta. People who are different from one another are going to have to live together. Poor people and people who are not poor *can* be together in the same community. People who are black and people who are

white *can* be together in the same community. The choice is either to rend the social fabric that holds us together or to do the hard, tedious work of reweaving the tapestry of our community. Those are our only choices. The choice of intractability and meanness is no choice. It will destroy our city. It will destroy our world.

It will also destroy our Presbyterian church. A friend who is active in denominational affairs has said that a matter of sexuality, and, specifically, the ordination of lesbians and gays in our denomination, has the potential of causing the greatest schism in our Presbyterian witness since the Civil War. We are fighting over everything. We're fighting over structure, we're fighting over money. The question is whether or not at the end of the twentieth century Presbyterians still believe there is such a thing as the reality of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Can we agree to disagree? Can we, at least, agree to stay in the same room and say to the person with whom we deeply disagree, "You are still my brother. You are still my sister. We have need of one another."

Imagination - it is the Holy Spirit's greatest gift to the Holy Catholic Church.

In his wonderful new book, *The Spirit of Life*, the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes:

After centuries of Western division in matters of belief, following generations of denominational absolutism, the ecumenical movement is without doubt the most important event in the twentieth century. The other churches are no longer viewed as opponents or competitors. They are taken seriously as partners. These things are possible only if we see "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" as something that transcends our denominational frontiers, so that we view other people belonging to other churches as members equal with us of the great community of God.⁷

The Spirit opens frontiers and makes understanding possible. I pray that the new frontier for the Christian church in the twenty-first century will be interfaith dialogue. The challenge is going to be whether or not Christians believe that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is an exclusive or an inclusive thing. We can engage in interfaith dialogue, not with the point that we're trying to make Christians out of Hindus or vice versa; the point is the conversation itself, a witness to a broken world that people who are not alike, who do not see things the same way, can talk to one another in an atmosphere of respect.

When that kind of conversation goes on, according to the story in the Book of Acts, we can be sure that the Spirit of the living God is present and active.

After World War II, E. M. Forster wrote of how this kind of imagination of which I am speaking today can work among peoples and nations in rebuilding a civilized world. It seems to me that his words are apropos to the challenges that are before us:

Architects, contractors, marketing boards, broadcasting corporations will never, by themselves, build a new world. They must be inspired by the proper spirit. Most people, when asked what the proper spirit is, would reply, "Love." We need to love one another. Nations must do that and then the series of cataclysms that are threatening to destroy us will be checked.

I respectfully disagree. We need something much less dramatic and emotional in the public sphere. Not love—tolerance. Tolerance is just the thing

for an overheated and overcrowded planet. It carries on when love gives out and love generally gives out when we move away from our home and our friends, and stand among strangers in a queue for potatoes at the grocery. Tolerance is what is needed in the street, in the office and it is above all needed among classes and races and nations. Sure it's dull. It requires imagination, where you have to always be putting yourself in someone else's place. Which is a very desirable spiritual exercise.⁸

Those people engaged in the debate would have been better off if they had engaged in a little spiritual exercise because it was clear that for some of those there, their imaginations had atrophied.

People in the former Yugoslavia are dying by the thousands because so many of their leaders have not had enough spiritual exercise. They cannot imagine any other way to work it out than to kill one another. Dr. Vesna Pesic, a pro-democracy human rights advocate in Serbia, ended a speech in Washington by saying to us in America, "I hear the echo of the warlords in my homeland with their claims that we cannot live together. *Do not believe them!*"⁹ Now, there is an imaginative woman.

It makes all the difference in the world what we human beings believe is possible. How trivial the war over political correctness in our own homeland seems in comparison to what is going on in Bosnia these days. But I want to say a word about the battle over political correctness, since the Pentecost has so much to do with what people say to one another, how it is received. I want to suggest that we need to have a little talk with ourselves in the United States and remind ourselves that free speech is essential to the health of our very diverse community. Words, even divisive, hurtful words, won't hurt us nearly as much as the stifling of words. We need to listen to one another and be tolerant of one another, even if we cannot stand what the other person is saying.

Sometimes, I imagine the Spirit of God brooding over our fractured communities, our broken families; brooding over all those places where people will not listen to people who are not like themselves and saying, "Why do you cling so to that chaos? Here. Let me show you a better way."

Well. . . speaking of speaking, I wonder if anyone here caught the last installment of *Cheers*? It was one of those television programs on which nothing much ever really happened. The plot was weak. If wanted action, you didn't look at *Cheers*. What happened on *Cheers* was that people talked, and in their talking, they grew and got connected and loved and got angry and got over it, and agreed to disagree. I read that more people watched the last segment of *Cheers* than had watched any television show, including the Super Bowl, in the last twelve months. Why do you think this happened. I think it had to do with the cast of characters and what they said to one another. It had to do with the fact that they listened to one another: the psychiatrist and the mailman and the bartender, all people you would think would never in a million years have anything in common. But they did have something in common, what all human beings have in common: we have our humanity in common. We have in common our need to be valued for who we are. We have in common our need to have a place where we can be who we are.

The best definition of church I know is that. It is the place where you can come as you are and be loved into being who you can become.

The point of life was the subject of the final conversation on *Cheers*. The mailman ruminated for a while and then suggested it had to do with finding a pair of comfortable

shoes. Carla said it had to do with having children and watching them grow up. The psychiatrist mumbled something about existential angst and no one was sure what he said, but he was listened to respectfully. Somebody, Norm perhaps, summed up the whole thing when he said, "The point of life is that we all need to know we are not alone."

That's why we loved *Cheers*. It was about *us*. It was about the *reality* of us. It was about the *possibility* of us. If anybody ever tells you we cannot live together, my friends, *do not believe them*. Believe in the reality of us, in the name of the Christ who lives and reigns with God the Father in the perfect unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Brodsky, "New Life," *The New Yorker*, April 26, 1993, 6-87.

² Walter Brueggemann makes this point beautifully in "Transforming the Imagination," *Books and Religion*, (spring 1992).

³ I cannot find the original source of this bit of Campbell wisdom, which I first quoted in a sermon in 1987.

⁴ Galatians 3:28.

⁵ Acts 2:11

⁶ As told in an article in *Parabola*, (summer, 1993), 30.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (Fortress Press, 1992), 4.

⁸ E.M. Forster, "Tolerance," *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 1951.

⁹ Vesna Pestic "A Glimmer of Democracy," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 May 1993.