

An Impossible Impossibility

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Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all of those who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language...?”
Acts 2:7-8

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

The Cure at Troy by Seamus Heaney

Tom Long tells the story of a young girl about five years old who came to church on Pentecost with her parents. She was all dressed up for the occasion. When she came forward for “The Time with Children,” her parents were sitting on the second row. The pastor told the story of Pentecost with the fire, the speaking in tongues, the earthquake—it was dramatic. As the pastor was in the middle of this dramatic story, the young girl stood up, looking towards her parents, put her hands on her hips, and in a loud whisper said, “I don’t believe a word of it!”

As Pentecost comes around again, are we like that young girl? Or maybe you have heard the story so often that it does not set off alarms. Since we have heard this old story so many times, it may be that “familiarity breeds contempt.” For those of us in mainline congregations, it seems like an unwelcome relative who comes around every year making too much noise and interrupting our orderly gathering, giving us the impression that he has been drinking before noon.

The part of the story that is hardest for me is not the “fireworks”: the tongues, wind, and fire! The story of Pentecost tells us that these people from diverse cultures and speaking different languages understood each other! “And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” (Acts 2:8). Indeed, how can this be possible? They had so many differences. It seems so foreign to us who have trouble understanding even our relatives or our neighbors, the people who are in the same pew in worship with us. We are waging war with words, and that has become the new norm.

This “understanding each other” all sounds good, but it appears to be unrealistic and way beyond our reach. It is very difficult to believe this is possible, living as we do in a time when our differences are tearing us apart not only in our culture but also in our churches. The message being preached from the bully pulpit at high levels of power with a harsh and strident tone is driving a wedge between us. Is preaching from our pulpits a Pentecost message about a gift of understanding that builds community instead of walls absurd at such a time as this?

Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor, a teacher, and one of the most significant voices

in the last century to articulate the Christian faith. Niebuhr described the challenge of following Jesus who calls us to practice radical love with others as “the impossible possibility.” From a human point of view, it seems impossible to understand those who seem so different from us. But, thank God, we are not left to our own resources.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Spirit of Life*, says that “the capacity to communicate, to be in communion with others is always a gift of God” (p. 219). Peter Gomes makes the same point this way: “Pentecost reminds us that the gift of understanding, that gift that transcends logic and diversity, is the gift of the spirit of unity: union with God . . . , with our sisters and brothers everywhere.” Gomes goes on to suggest that this “understanding of the other” does not take away our identity, our particularity, but rather, in our diversity we become more that we have been because as we understand each other, we grow into a larger community which expands us and our world.

The crucial need for this gift of understanding that builds community was illustrated for me in an editorial by Thomas Friedman, the noted author and columnist in the *New York Times*. Friedman taught me a new word that I think is a helpful way to think about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. The word is *hyperconnectivity*.

“Sometime around the year 2000,” Friedman writes, “the world achieved a very high level of connectivity, virtually flattening the global economic playing field. This web of connectivity was built on the diffusion of personal computers, fiber-optic cable, the Internet and web servers. What this platform did was to make Boston and Beijing or Detroit and Damascus next-door neighbors. It brought some two billion people into a global conversation.” Friedman continues, “We went from a connected world to a ‘hyperconnected world.’ This deeper penetration of connectivity is built on smarter cellphones, wireless bandwidth, and social networks. This new platform for connectivity, being so cheap and mobile, is bringing another two billion people into the conversation from more and more remote areas.”

Friedman observes, “There is no such thing as ‘local’ anymore.” There are enormous social and political implications. Dictators can no longer isolate their regimes from the rest of the world and hide what they are doing to their own people by shutting down the newspapers, expelling networks such as CNN and BBC, so long as people have smartphones. However, there is a major disconnect experience living in a world of hyperconnectivity.

In a cover story of an issue of *The Atlantic*, the question is asked: “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” The author tells the story of a woman who was well-connected in social media. She was “friended” by a number of people. It seemed she had a lot of connections. But she died alone in her apartment, and her body was not found for some time. The author of the article goes on to say that the irony here is that “within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation. We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. We were promised a global village; instead we inhabit the drab cul-de-sacs and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information.”¹

Back to Pentecost. The gift of Pentecost through the power of God’s Spirit was people speaking, listening, and hearing. The miracle of Pentecost was communication.

The art of listening is not easy but essential to receive the gift of understanding. How often have you really listened to someone? It takes time and intentionality. Practicing the art of listening is an act of the will.

Hugh T. Kerr, former editor of *Theology Today*, wrote an editorial a few years ago on communication. “Our failure to communicate,” Kerr wrote, “is not a failure of technique but of will. We don’t want to communicate. We’d rather shout one another down.” Think of the conflicts and arguments that we’ve been a part of over the years and how little communicating—speaking and hearing—was part of it.

So here is the question: are we content with the status quo, to live with deep suspicion and animosity towards those who differ from us in the church and the world? Or are we open to believe that the gift of understanding is possible and let it shape our relationships? Can you believe that there is a reality in the world that counters the forces at work to exploit our differences and drive us further apart? Can we believe a force is at work to bring us together and to build the Beloved Community among us?

This is what makes the impossible possible: in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God let that force loose in the world. That force is still at work, making the miracle of understanding happen. It is the power of God’s love made known to us in Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us over and over that what seems impossible to us humans, God makes possible. God’s love works in our lives, enabling us to live together despite our differences.

Accepting the gift of understanding starts with the radical belief that we are all created in God’s image. It is the belief that we are created not to live as isolated individuals. The Psalmist affirms this belief: “How good and pleasant it is when we live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). The beginning of understanding is to believe in the dignity and worth of “the other” as a child of God. Such an affirmation leads us to listen to others as children of God. Listening to another affirms the dignity of the other and shows that you respect that person.

All of this sounds good in theory, but isn’t the realization of the gift of understanding an impossibility in our fractured world? In Durham, North Carolina, where I have lived for 40 years, I can bear witness to having seen understanding practiced in a radical fashion. I got to know two people who could not have been more different. C.P. Ellis grew up in a poor white section of town and was a proud member of the KKK. Ann Atwater, a single mother from the poor black section of town, became active in the struggle for civil rights. Ellis and Atwater met on opposite sides of the public school integration issue. Their first encounters were charged with hatred and suspicion. As they began to listen to each other and hear about their separate struggles, they forged a friendship that remains a source of inspiration and hope. Ellis made it clear to his family that he wanted Ann Atwater to deliver his eulogy, which she did. Fortunately, their story is recorded in an excellent book, *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, which was made into a movie that was recently released.

Let me share with you a personal experience. Several years ago, my presbytery was working on “peace and unity,” and we were asked us to sit down and talk with someone in our presbytery with whom we did not agree on some important issues. To be very honest with you, I was not looking forward to that experience, but with some fear and trepidation, I made an appointment with someone for whom I had re-

spect but I knew was on a different wavelength than I was on some important issues. We sat down to talk. We were honest with each other, honest about our differences, honest about our hopes for the church. We tried to listen to each other. I want to tell you something amazing happened. My point of view wasn't changed. I don't think his was, either. But we came to understand and appreciate each other so that by the end of the conversation, we were able to say to each other, "Surely, the Lord was in this place, and we didn't know it."

Occasionally, you encounter someone who has the will to communicate in order to achieve understanding and build community. Joe Martin was a friend of mine from high school. He had an outstanding career, was very active in his church, and was a civic leader in Charlotte who helped to revitalize downtown and helped to make it a more tolerant and inclusive city. After he was diagnosed with ALS, he was honored for all he had contributed to the city. At a huge gathering to express the community's appreciation, he suggested the best honor they could give him was for each one to make a commitment to have lunch regularly with someone who was different. This may sound like a small gesture, but I am told that a host of folks signed on and that it made a big difference in human relations in the city.

I know a white congregation and black congregation that committed to spend time getting to know each other. Over twenty years, they shared in worship, study, and service. They worked together to build several homes with Habitat for Humanity. It was not an easy journey as they had to face some hard truths and develop trust. It enriched the lives of both congregations as they came to see their ability to understand each other as a gift from God.

Walter Brueggemann, a noted scholar of Hebrew Scripture, says it is important for the church to note that Pentecost is not just a remembered event but an ongoing process by which the Spirit of God regularly rattles, bewilders, and turns the world upside down (*Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2010). And, I would add, it is the promise that God never abandons this world, never abandons the church, or you or me, for that matter; the promise that the Spirit of God will continue to stir, to energize, to comfort, to challenge our imaginations, our faith, our hope: that is the promise of Pentecost. I invite you to take it seriously as together, as a church, as individuals, we face the future. We do not know what is coming tomorrow, but we do know that God's Spirit is with us to challenge us, to guide us, to give us hope. Pentecost is an affirmation that we worship and serve a God who is working to bring people together, a God who mends brokenness, who remakes and transforms separateness into oneness and wholeness. That is the promise of Pentecost, the promise of this miracle that people from different places will listen to each other and understand. Sure, it's easier to shout and to talk about the stupidity of people who are different from us. But that is not what begins to build up a Beloved Community, a community that reflects God's good future.

During this Pentecost season, let us recommit ourselves to let the miracle of Pentecost happen among us. It may be something as simple as beginning a conversation with someone with whom you have differences, maybe about things that matter to you in the church or in the world, in the political realm or in the theological realm. I know this is difficult. It may be something as simple as forming a group of people who differ and agree to listen to each other and to read Scripture together, to seek the mind of Christ. It may be inviting a mixed group of people to see the movie "The

Best of Enemies” and discussing it together.

If you do it, you’ll be in the company of the Spirit of the Risen Lord who took the time to listen to a Samaritan woman whom others wanted to stone, who ate with the tax collector whom everyone else hated, who went to a whole assortment of human beings and touched them and ate with them and talked with them, a group of assorted human beings like you and me for whom he was willing to die.

What the church and the world so desperately need now is for us to reclaim our birthright, the gift of understanding. It was given to us at Pentecost to bring us together as a community. Let us recommit to strive to understand each other, to let this seeming impossibility of understanding each other in our diversity become a possibility through us. This can be a sign to the church and the world that there is hope for us to live together as children of God.

Note

1. Stephen Marche, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” *The Atlantic*, 309, no. 4 (May 2012): 60.