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Text: Acts 2: 1-13

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The World House: Some Lessons from Pentecost

Were you to press me to name a favorite biblical story, I would respond without hesitation. It is the story we just heard, the giving of the Holy Spirit in the event called Pentecost. And if you were to ask which, among all the stories and images contained within the Bible, articulated the most relevant and hopeful truth for the realities that we're now contending with as a country and as a world, I would again answer without hesitation: Pentecost. There could be other contenders, all of them important. But Pentecost is a story that speaks to the challenges we're confronting both nationally and internationally right now. And it speaks to the work that our congregation has been engaged in for nearly forty years. In this new era of American isolation and bellicosity abroad, and in this era of distrust and misinformation at home, it may be time to examine the story of Pentecost more fully.

We just heard it, I know, but the story is this. As the disciples are both mourning the absence of Jesus, and learning to live into whatever it is that resurrection entails, they experienced a kind of ecstatic event. They were filled with what came to be understood as a spirit - a holy spirit - symbolized in the text by a flaming tongue of fire resting upon their heads. It allowed them to speak in languages they did not themselves understand or know, and to comprehend the speech of others. The text tells us that people from all around the Mediterranean rim, from Rome, to North Africa, and then throughout the Middle East and well into Asia too - the entirety of the known world in other words - suddenly found themselves able to communicate with each other. But what's more, that ability to communicate led not only to understanding, but to a mutual affirmation of being - a meeting and merger of lives and concerns. This scene produced such joy - such relief, maybe? - that some claimed that those so affected had been doing some day drinking.

But this was something different. This was an event that reversed the great curse of Babel laid upon humans in the book of Genesis. That's a story of human connection being severed. That's a story about trying to communicate, with nobody being able to listen, still less to understand the other. Sound familiar? In the scene of Pentecost, however, a new possibility emerges, in which a great healing power - a Spirit that goes by many names, but which we name the Spirit of the living Christ - descends upon the world, enabling mutual comprehension, enabling an affirmation of being across the divisions that separate us.

Now, some of our more conservative brethren and sistren have understood this passage to entail a kind of occult practice, called speaking in tongues. Whole branches of Christianity, called Pentecostal, have been built around this tale. In a worship service, they may be overcome with a fervor that manifests itself in ecstatic speech that, these days anyway, isn't really attached to a specific language at all. Really, it's a private and personal moment of spiritual ecstasy practiced in the company of others. But for me, at least, such practices miss the entire point of the Pentecost event. It's not about strange speech, but about human comprehension. Not only that, we can say that what happens in the Bible extends way beyond speech. Language, after all, is far more than the words we speak. It's the entirety of how we communicate - the whole of our cultural repertoire: words, music, dress, movement, ritual and life patterns, beliefs, foodways, and countless other less tangible features of life that all serve to communicate who we are. And so, again, the event of Pentecost has to do with the way that, as human beings separated by different geographies and cultural patterns, we sometimes, miraculously, manage to find one another, recognize one another, and celebrate our shared humanity across all that keeps us apart. It is the creation of a World House, an enormous dwelling that we all share together. When that happens, it really can lead to a kind of ecstatic joy, especially if it releases tensions or hostilities that have long been simmering. Far from being

an occult phenomenon reserved for certain corners of the Christian tradition - which, by the way, have become more and more politically reactionary over the years - Pentecost is a deeply human event of recognition and mutual affirmation that we have all experienced in our lives.

Let me name a few examples familiar to many of you. It's that shock of recognition and joy that we have felt when we've welcomed refugee families to Old Lyme. Though we don't know one another's words, there's a shared spirit of humanity that binds us in such moments. That's Pentecost. It's the feeling that we all have when our Muslim friends join us for worship, or when we go to the mosque to pray with them. When we all stand together as children of Abraham, sensing our bond across our different religious practices, that's Pentecost. When travelers from the US are welcomed into the homes of Palestinians living in the West Bank, as many of you have been in the past, Pentecost happens. When white Christians from Old Lyme travel to Ghana and find not censure or shunning for the sins of our past, but an open spirit of welcome, Pentecost takes place. And frankly, when we gather in this space to worship, knowing full well that those sitting near us may organize the world along very different lines, and when we find ways to love and appreciate one another all the same, that's Pentecost.

I have known that Spirit, and I think most of you have too. That's why, despite its association with a form of Christian faith that I don't identify with, I wish to call myself a Pentecostal Christian. Or maybe it's better to say "a follower of Jesus shaped by Pentecost." My wish is that we all might make a similar affirmation.

But why insist on this story now? There is, after all, a Sunday shortly after Easter devoted to Pentecost. Liturgical calendars, even those issued by the UCC, call it Pentecost Sunday. That day is still a long way off. What does this story have to tell us now?

Adopting the old adage of reading the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, Pentecost, and its precursor, the story of Babel, suggest a helpful way of interpreting what is currently happening to our international alliances, and the shockwaves that are even now spreading across the globe. I watched the footage on Friday as our President and Vice-President berated President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, effectively driving a wedge not only between the US and Ukraine, but also between the US and much of Europe. That was an event of Babel, the fracturing of both speech and relationship, with consequences that will be far reaching. But Babel, the severing of language, comprehension, and relationship, has been the dominant motif we have been experiencing of late all over the place. It was an event of Babel when the Vice President elevated far right parties in Europe, which have sheltered neo-Nazis, fracturing long standing relationships. When US AID was shuttered, and then called a criminal organization, it was an event of Babel, straining relationships, but also jeopardizing lives. I could go on. Suffice to say that under the rule of Babel - which is, by the way, the rule of all authoritarian regimes - tension, open hostility, incomprehension, and suspicion descend upon the world. To be fair, this is a spirit that has long prevailed on the international stage, and it has been unleashed in many different eras and in many different locations. But it is now being amplified to disastrous effect.

Given the enormity of the chaos of Babel, it may seem like a rather thin promise to speak of Pentecost. And yet, guided by Scripture and by centuries of theological practice, I believe Pentecost remains a reality that we can live into, a promise that we can grasp. There is a world building and life affirming power given at Pentecost that still runs through the world. It happens through patient conversation. It happens through the long and painstaking establishment of trust. It happens through a steady presence over a long period, and in continual gestures of goodwill and of friendship. It happens by sitting with one another, sometimes in silence, and recognizing the deep spirit inside our humanity that binds us to other humans. It happens by sharing music, food, and ritual practices. I believe that it is through such ordinary activities (rare though they are these days) that lasting peace is generated. It is through such basic and painstaking relational work - diplomacy really - that mutual understanding between people, and thereafter between nations, is achieved. We have the capacity to practice such things in our individual lives, but in our collective lives too. Though the roar of Babel is fierce, the Spirit of Pentecost is still waiting to be enacted.

Now, here's what I'd like to suggest - and it may sound a little starry eyed, but hear me out. If the US government is abdicating that role - of diplomacy, of deep listening, and of gestures of goodwill and friendship

around the world - then perhaps it is time for churches such as this one to step into that leadership vacuum. If the US government is no longer willing to lead such efforts, then perhaps those who adhere to the spirit of Pentecost can find our own ways of doing so. That is, in essence, what we have been doing around here for forty years now. Our congregation has practiced a kind of spiritual diplomacy through our mission partnerships. They have each involved repairing some of the lasting damage from our settler colonial history. They have each been ways of allowing spirit to recognize spirit, and of affirming the humanity of friends from communities across vast geographical and cultural distances. They have called us, as citizens of the US, out of our bubbles, out of our isolation, and out of the fear of the other that too often still clings to us. And they have, we hope and trust, served to counter some of the dominant negative stereotypes of who we are in the United States. Something I have heard over and over again during our mission travels is this statement: "We understand that you as individuals and as a faith community are not identical to your government and its policies." I don't think we should underestimate the importance of those small gestures of goodwill and friendship around the world. I believe they are keeping the very spirit of Pentecost alive in ways that the world needs right now.

The good news is that we haven't been alone in doing that work. We have a unique way of doing things here at FCCOL, sure, but active and activist congregations have fanned out across the globe for decades now, and really for centuries. That has had negative consequences, to be sure, and there are still, no doubt, some who fit into an older paradigm of missions - saving souls, winning converts, and doing short term projects that may or may not benefit those on the receiving end. That's not what we understand partnership to be. There is a different pattern, practiced by this church and many others like it, of accompaniment, of companionship upon a life journey, and of building mutual bonds of affection and friendship among disparate peoples. It might sound hokey and it might sound improbable, but it may be that in this new era of American isolationism, the global partnerships that we and others have nurtured can collectively work to counter the hostility that has been unleashed upon the world. It may be that we can, collectively, have a cooling effect upon our international relationships. And it may be that our denominations, the UCC and the Presbyterians, the Methodists and the Episcopalians and all the rest can encourage and build upon such efforts, to create a program of spiritual diplomacy in the absence of official diplomacy.

Look, I'm just a country preacher, tucked into a small but beautiful part of New England. But this place - FCCOL - has always thought and dreamt big. This is a place that has always punched way out of its weight class. And so while everybody else is busy turning inward right now, why not think and act otherwise? The goodness of the world may depend upon a thousand and one small acts - small manifestations of the spirit of Pentecost - like those we and others have practiced in our mission partnerships for a while now.

In a little more than a week, travelers from FCCOL will be journeying to eastern Cuba on what will be a spiritual pilgrimage. We will be exploring the ways Haiti has shaped that part of Cuba, and how communities surrounding Santiago have kept Haitian traditions, ritual celebrations, and musical practices alive. In preparing for this journey, I have conversed with people from the communities we'll be visiting, and they are excited to welcome us, and to share with us. One man, a priest in the tradition of Vodou, shared that, for him, it is a miracle that we will come all that way simply to visit, simply to be with him and his community. I don't think we can underestimate the importance of such a visit, which serves to communicate that he and his community matter, and that their history and traditions are worthy of celebration. Nor do I think we can underestimate the power of that kind of relationship building in this new and volatile era we're living through. In such intimate moments, we are given a glimpse into the very heart of what it means to be animated by the spirit of Pentecost. That such encounters can take place, between New England Christians and those practicing traditions that have kept the human spirit alive amidst tremendous upheaval and trauma is, to me, confirmation that the same Holy Spirit dwelling in those first believers in Acts chapter 2 is still alive and well.

Because of the long term and catastrophic effects of the economic embargo on Cuba, this is also a medical mission. We've been asked to carry medical supplies, as well as over the counter medications like ibuprofen, tylenol, and multivitamins. This will relieve suffering - plain and simple. A list of requests is on the back of your bulletins. If you're able, if you're willing, and if you pick up some of those supplies, you can deliver them to the church office through next Sunday, and we'll be sure to take them with us. I'm frequently asked how we

might have an impact in the world right now. What I promise you is that even one bottle of ibuprofen will make a more profound impact than you can imagine. It's a way of practicing spiritual diplomacy, and of allowing the Spirit of Pentecost to take hold.

I'll close with this. For Christmas, Laura gave me a recent book from Rick Steves, the travel writer, a figure I happen to admire. He is a person of deep and abiding faith. He goes to church, and he talks openly about God. And he writes about travel in a way that is consistent with what we do around here, and with the diplomatic but also broadly Pentecostal emphasis that I've been describing. (I once even wrote to invite him to visit us here in Old Lyme, and I received a very warm response, though the scheduling and timing didn't quite work.) Anyway, at the end of the book Laura gave me, Rick Steves writes this:

“Travelers learn that fear is for people who don't get out much; that culture shock is the growing pains of a broadening perspective; that we're all children of God - and by traveling, we get to know the family.”

He then continues:

“I believe that if more people could have such transformative experiences, our world would be a more just and stable place. Travelers understand that the big challenges of the future will be blind to borders, and that we'll need to tackle them together...but most fundamentally, travelers know that the world is a welcoming place filled with joy, love, and good people.”

That's the spirit of Pentecost, at least in my theology. Amidst the chaos of Babel, that's the Spirit I wish to follow. Don't you?