

That We May Be One...

Acts 2:1-21 John 14:8-17; 15:26-27; 16:7-8, 12-13a

Today is Pentecost. We celebrate it with great enthusiasm. Yet if someone would ask those of us who belong to this congregation if we were members of a pentecostal church, we would probably say “No!” The name “Pentecostal” conjures up a picture of a certain type of worship with which most Presbyterians do not associate themselves.

There was a story of a visitor who wandered into a Presbyterian church one Sunday morning during worship. Although he was a bit late, he walked right up the center aisle, and sat in the front pew. All went well until the minister began the sermon. As the minister made the first point, the visitor muttered an enthusiastic “Um-hmm, yes Lord!” Everyone stared, but being polite, said nothing. The minister made the second point, and this time the visitor responded with a loud, “Oh yes, Lord! Thank you, Jesus!” This shook the minister a bit, but the sermon continued.

By now the congregation was starting to get embarrassed. All eyes were on the visitor. Everyone was waiting, horrified to see what he would do next. The head usher, who could see that worship was being completely disrupted, moved in to the pew behind him. Just as the minister made the third point, the visitor raised both hands into the air, filled his lungs, preparing to stand up and shout a great exclamation of approval, when the head usher placed his hand firmly on the visitor’s shoulder, holding him to his seat. “Excuse me,” whispered the usher. The man looked at him, puzzled, and then prepared to stand up again. “Excuse me,” whispered the usher, again pushing the man back into the pew. “I’m sorry, but you can’t do that here.”

“What?” said the visitor.

“I said, you really can’t behave like that.”

“*But I’ve found Jesus!*” the visitor reported.

“Well,” said the usher indignantly, “you certainly didn’t find him *here!*”

Today is Pentecost. We celebrate it, but we are afraid of it, too. We have an idea that a little Holy Spirit is fine, but too much Holy Spirit, and pretty soon you’re saying, “Yes, Lord” out loud in church, and speaking in tongues. That makes a lot of Presbyterians nervous, so we do our best, most of the time, to keep an arm’s length away from the Holy Spirit.

Real spirituality—the experience of being filled with awareness of the presence of God—is not something which tames you or makes you into a milk-toast personality; on the contrary. Spirituality is power. Power as bold and bright as these colors on our Pentecost banners; power as hot as fire; power as unrelenting as the wind; as pure as crystal spring water. A spiritual person (or, we could say, literally, a *pentecostal* person) is a person who places great importance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in his or her life.

Jesus was such a person. In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus explains to his disciples about what the coming of the Holy Spirit will mean for them.

Now, it’s just your bad luck that I’ve been preparing to teach a class on the Gospel of John for the past two months. John, as you know, is laden with metaphor, symbolism and poetic language. It is also chock-full of riddles, mysteries and – as we like to call them – “hidden things.” Compared to Matthew Mark and Luke it is a gospel message of a very different kind. So much so that a careful reading can only lead to the conclusion that whoever

put together this masterpiece of holy scripture had something to say that the other three gospel writers either didn't know or didn't understand.

For all these reasons, if we don't dig deeper in this gospel we will only come away perplexed, or maybe even repelled by what we hear.

These latter chapters in John's gospel are what is called Jesus' "farewell discourses." Only in the Fourth Gospel does Jesus speak at such length. It is reminiscent of Moses and his farewell discourses as his death approached, knowing that he would not enter Canaan with those who had followed him.

What I want you to consider today is the language Jesus uses in describing the relationship between Jesus, the Father and Holy Spirit. Last week, if you remember, we heard these words:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may [my disciples] also be in us... so that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one...

And in today's lesson Philip (God bless him) makes this request: "*Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.*"

Jesus sounds very discouraged and frustrated at this. When he answers, he says,

Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

And, referring to the Spirit of Truth, Jesus says,

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

This language may sound a little convoluted and confusing. And that is because Jesus is trying to express something in words that really is beyond description: *mystical union*.

The idea that we can not only know about God, but actually *experience* God is mysticism. Sound rather far-fetched and "New Agey?" Well consider this example from the foundation of the church. The apostle Paul never met Jesus in the flesh, but he had a mystical experience of Jesus that changed his life forever. Everything Paul knew about Jesus, everything Paul preached and taught about Jesus is based entirely on his visions – his mystical experiences. So it is important to realize that Christianity itself is, at its very essence, mystical.

The writer of the Gospel of John not only affirms this, he or she proclaims that we cannot know Jesus or understand Jesus' life and teachings unless we see that Jesus himself – and his mission – were about mystical union with God.

I wish there were a simple way to understand this, but there isn't. There is, however a simple way to *misunderstand* it. And that is to say, "It just means that Jesus is God." This *is* simple, and it is not wrong entirely; but it only scratches the surface of who Jesus is and how we, as followers of Jesus, are in relationship with him and with God.

Jesus, in John's gospel, describes three stages through which his disciples pass to reach right relationship with God, or mystic union. We are quite familiar with the first two. They are:

1. Letting go of our old selves and old ways of thinking (Jesus often spoke of the necessity of "dying to ourselves" or of "denying ourselves.")
2. Understanding. Not just intellectual assent, but accepting to Jesus' teachings to the point where they become part of us at our innermost being.

The third stage, the one Jesus tried so hard to help his disciples reach, was experiencing the truth that just as Jesus and Abba were so close that there was no separation between them, so could they, the disciples, experience that closeness. This was the experience of eternal life

of which Jesus spoke. This was what he meant by “abiding in him and in the Father.” This mystic experience is what Jesus spoke of when he taught about the Kingdom of God. This is the Jesus John the Evangelist shows us.

Sadly, much of the church throughout the ages has settled for a simple but shallow understanding of Jesus’ teachings. But not all of the church. You may have heard of such characters as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Pelagius, Francis of Assisi, Augustine, Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila or Thomas à Kempis. Mystics; every one.

Or, in more modern times, William Blake, Carlos Castaneda, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Alan Watts, Thomas Keating, Ken Wilber, Matthew Fox, Corrie Ten Boom, Evelyn Underhill, Karl Rahner and Dorothy Day; to name only a few.

These folks, and many others, have sought and found a deeper meaning in Jesus’ words and life, toward which the author of John’s gospel points; to which Jesus himself points.

And Jesus, of course, did not point to himself; he pointed only to God. For the best of reasons, I suppose, we love to call Jesus King of Kings and Lord of Lords; we love to place him on the highest throne and crown him with jewels and gold, bowing down to him as “very God of very God.” But is this what Jesus wanted? Remember, his name, *Yeshua*, means not “I am Savior,” but rather “*Yahweh brings salvation.*” Even the famous “I AM” sayings in John’s gospel do not refer to Jesus, the 1st century Palestinian Jew, but rather to the One whom Jesus perfectly reveals and reflects: Yahweh: the Creator, the Redeemer; the Sustainer.

So on this Pentecost Day we recall some of those who have experienced the presence of God and who were changed forever: a voice from the flames of a burning bush called Moses to action in Egypt; Jacob wrestled with God on the banks of the Jabbok River; the prophet Jeremiah wrote that the word of God burned inside him “*like a blazing fire in my heart;*” John Wesley wrote that he felt his heart strangely warmed; and on that first-century Pentecost Day, people of God from every nation felt the rush of a mighty wind, saw flames of fire descending from heaven and heard foreign tongues each in their own language. The coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth came with great power – the unmistakable power of God’s presence being experienced. A mystical experience on a grand scale. And in celebrating this, we testify that, as Jesus taught and promised, God is present with us always.

But not just present with us, *one with us*, even as Jesus was one with Abba. Jesus’ final prayer was not that he, Jesus, would be glorified, but rather that the church would find and experience oneness with God. Jesus’ final prayer was for mystic unity:

...that [my followers] may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us; may they be one as we are one.”¹ May it be so.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.

¹ John 17