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Christian Anti-Racist Times

This year, when I began reflecting on the Pentecost story, I was struck again by the amazing power of what happened on that day. The scripture says, “there were devout Jews from EVERY NATION under heaven living in Jerusalem.” And it says the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” The crowd was “amazed and astonished” because “each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” Those speaking were from Galilee, and so people in crowd were bewildered, shocked – as we would be listening to Mandarin or Swahili perhaps. Yet, as the scripture recounts, “we hear, each of us, in our own native language... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God.”

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We know that sometimes this gift of the Spirit happens today. Sometimes the Holy Spirit moves and visits us, helping us to really speak to and really hear one another. In my experience this kind of true understanding or deep understanding that transcends barriers of language, culture, race etc. is rare, very rare. But I have known it to happen on a few occasions. It happens more easily it seems to me when people have some things in common – especially spiritual agreement or faith, as in this story, where all the people were devout Jews. Always in my experience, this kind of transcending communication comes about because of God’s presence or because of visitation by the Spirit. Many who look at the things that most deeply divide us – racism, sexism, or economic class, for example – have observed that it seems impossible for us to overcome these barriers on our own with only human efforts, that to get beyond the obstacles and limitations raised by these forces, we must have divine help...But often we don’t avail ourselves of this help.



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I want to call special attention to the last part of Acts 2. What is so amazing to me about this passage is that it seems as though the Holy Spirit has moved in with the early Christians, is actually living among the people. The scripture says “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and *had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.* Day by day, they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” What a beautiful, marvelous picture of the life God plans for us and intends for us to live! The people of Acts 2, these early Christians were able to sustain understanding, love, and economic justice and they were able to make God’s kingdom, Jesus’ beloved community, their daily way of life – because the Holy Spirit was their constant companion.

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So sometimes the Spirit comes to us as in the Pentecost story, in the rush of a mighty wind, or as tongues of fire, enabling us to speak so that people who don’t speak our language can still understand us, and enabling us to hear and comprehend what is spoken in languages we aren’t familiar with. Or if we are truly blessed, the Spirit may come and live with us and our communities on a daily basis, as I believe happened in the early church.

Often, though, neither of these is our experience. Then, as we struggle and pray for understanding, the Spirit might just connect us with another individual, as happens in the last passage I want to look at. As I read further in Acts, I came upon a story about an African believer that for me suggests ways we can reach out for the Holy Spirit and to each other for mutual liberation. I’m talking about the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. He was a black man and a very powerful official in charge of the treasury of the Ethiopian queen Candace. The Holy Spirit directs Philip to approach the Ethiopian. And Church tradition says that after the events of this story, after he was baptized by Philip, the Ethiopian became the first Christian missionary to his continent, Africa.



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I was also led to this story when I sought specific examples of black people in the scriptures. On first reading it, it seemed to me that the text was not an antiracist one, but rather reinforced racial

stereotypes. For instance, the black Ethiopian man is instructed in spiritual matters by Philip, most probably a lighter (though still most likely brown-skinned man). Also there is the description of him as a “eunuch.” My first thought was how could this identification be anything but problematic. As I looked at the scripture more, however, I realized that both the Ethiopian’s skin color and his uncertain gender were important in showing the universality of Jesus’ message. The good news of Jesus was and is for all races, all genders, and ALL people.

I think the other even more important element in this story is the fact that the Ethiopian man is very much open and seeking to know God. He says, “How can I understand unless someone guides me?” Then he invites Philip to get into his chariot and sit with him, and he asks Philip questions about a passage he had been reading from Isaiah. The Ethiopian doesn’t hang back or hold back. He doesn’t worry about whether or how Philip will receive him. When they pass by a body of water, he doesn’t wait to be invited to think about maybe getting baptized sometime down the road. He volunteers, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And so he is baptized then and there. We all should be so open and reach out across racial, class, and cultural lines, seeking understanding and ready to claim a unifying, saving identity in Christ... But it isn’t always easy to do this, is it?



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My final thoughts relate to the idea of mutually liberating relationships, which is one of the core values and most central principles in the work of our mission. What I am suggesting in these remarks is that mutually liberating relationships don’t seem to just develop on their own in our capitalistic, profit-driven society where racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and other forms of injustice are, unfortunately, very alive and well. If we want to really connect with one another in ways that aren’t superficial, in ways that lead us to seek and to act on what matters, and in ways that liberate us and save us, we need to seek and rely on God’s Holy Spirit. And, like the Ethiopian official, we need to be open and eager to invite others who are different from us into our “chariots” – our homes, our jobs, our lives, not to mention our hopes, our dreams, our journey and our freedom in Christ. And so I pray that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit will help us to do this. Amen.



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