

A farmer had a very unhappy wife. She constantly complained. He himself was a man of very few words. The only peace he ever found was when he was out in the field behind his mule plowing. One day, much to his surprise, she brought him a sandwich when he was out plowing. He sat down in the field to eat. She stood over him complaining non-stop. Finally, the mule had had enough. Its ears went back, he kicked the wife full-on, and she fell down, stone-cold dead. At the funeral home the next evening, all the women went up to the new widower and said something to him, at which point he always shook his head 'yes.' When the men came up to him and said something to him, he always shook his head 'no.' The funeral director was watching all of this, and so at the end of the evening he asked: "Why did you always shake your head 'yes' to the women and 'no' to the men?" The man replied, "the women all said 'doesn't she look beautiful, at peace?' The men all asked 'is that mule for sale?'"

First, a few comments about the reading from the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES we just heard. There is a big debate among scholars about the fact that the apostles were suddenly heard speaking in new languages. Some people argue that each one suddenly learned a new language, as if I suddenly had the ability to preach in Russian. Others argue that the people were speaking in tongues, like modern-day Pentecostals. It's an interesting question, but if we focus too much on it, we miss the bigger question. It's sufficient to say simply, 'The Holy Spirit has done something wonderful and powerful in this moment.'

We also shouldn't miss the obvious parallel to the tower of Babel. After all, if Christ is coming to reconcile the world, it stands to reason that this undoes the damage wrought by the pride and sin of those at Babel. If we were to read just a couple lines more than we have in the first reading today, we would hear the crowds, in a rare moment of insight, manage to get the question right for once, "What does this mean?" they ask one another. The crowd articulates what we always seem to want to do when we encounter the work of the living God: rationalize it as bad behavior: "They're just drunk," they say. Peter says "It's too early – we haven't had a single bloody Mary!" (well that's my free translation from the Greek – but then, I was never very good at Greek!) But the bottom line message is this: God is up to something very big here, and as disciples of Christ, we want to be part of it. (adapted from Willimon, April-June 2018, p. 24)

Second, so what? I'd like to look at what God is up to – from a church perspective, and then from a personal perspective. Anglican Archbishop William Temple said that "The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its nonmembers." We are too often asking the wrong question when we join a parish. We usually ask "Will this parish give me what I want? Will it suit ME?" We approach church like we approach grocery shopping. But the question is SUPPOSED to be "What will I be able to contribute to this community from my time, talent and treasure?" Remember, baptism is a call to service, not a ticket to heaven. Philip Yancey says that there are 29 uses of the phrase 'one another' in the New Testament. Taken together, they show what a true community, a real church should look like. They include the following: Love one another. Forgive one another. Pray for one another. Bear one another's burdens. Be devoted to one another. Regard one another as more important than yourself. Do not speak against one another. Do not judge one another. Show tolerance for one another. Be kind to one another. Speak truth to one another. Build up one another. Comfort one another. Care for one another. Stimulate one another to love and good deeds.

If we followed this model, how differently the church would look to a watching world, not to mention how different history would look, if Christians everywhere followed this model. (adapted from Yancey, VANISHING GRACE, p. 106-198)

Third, we need to realize that Pentecost is not some abstract reality that happened 2000 years ago and is just a historical event that we are commemorating today. It is not JUST the birthday of the church. No, Pentecost is ongoing, ever-happening in our world and in our lives. How does this work?

Life can be difficult, a real struggle at times. This is true for everyone. We all live with inferiorities, dashed dreams and deep frustrations. Because of this we easily grow jealous. We envy other people's lives, seeing in their lives the things that we are missing within our own. This increases our disappointment with who we are, and all too often, puts us into an attitude within which we refuse to accept what is good, happy, creative, and pleasurable in our own lives.

Instead of picking up our own lives and living them as creatively as we can, we put them on hold. We focus on something we are missing, and desperately crave – a marriage partner, a certain friendship, a certain achievement or recognition, a better physical appearance, more money, a certain fame or place to live – and we relativize and belittle our own lives to the point of finding them unhappy and meaningless. We live in brackets, waiting; always waiting for this certain something to come along and fulfill our lives. When this doesn't happen, (and it rarely ever does) a deep restlessness sets in.

This reality is reflected in the images of Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost. After the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are unable to pick up the spirit of His new presence. They want, instead, to have their old earthly Jesus back. Eventually, they are reduced to huddling in fear in a locked room, paralyzed. When they do receive the spirit of the resurrected Christ, they burst from that room, now alive with the spirit of their actual lives. When we live in restless unhappiness, not satisfied with our situation in life because we are unmarried, or we are not married to whom we would like to be, or because we would want a different job, or family, or body, or set of friends, or city to live in, we live, like those Apostles, huddled in fear.

There is a wonderful example of this in Brian Moore's novel, *THE LONELY PASSION OF JUDITH HEARNE*. Judith Hearne is a woman approaching menopause. She is bright, talented, educated, artistic, and gifted with a pleasant personality and good looks. But she desperately wants to be married. She is deeply frustrated with being single and does not consider herself a complete person. Consciously and unconsciously, her whole life is geared toward finding a husband. Because of this, she sees her entire present life as having little meaning or satisfaction. She wants to be married and has decided that, for her, there can be no meaning, no genuine goodness, outside of that. Early on in the story, she meets a man who interests her, and who she senses is interested in her. He is a pleasant man, but he is also a calculating schemer and dilettante. It is soon apparent to the reader that Judith would be taken for a ride if she married him. However, because she is desperate, and this is a real chance at marriage, Judith pursues the relationship and in a vague kind of way, does fall in love. On his part, the man sees her as a possible business partner, as someone whose money he could use.

At a certain point, Judith proposes to him. She is rejected and the disappointment, coupled with the hurt of rejection, triggers within her a deep depression which takes her on an alcoholic binge and eventually leads to a nervous breakdown and a mental hospital. The story climaxes with her ex-boyfriend coming to visit her in the hospital and announcing that he has changed his mind and wants to marry her after all. She refuses and in her explanation to him of her decision we learn things to help us to understand the connection between Ascension and Pentecost, and the power of the Spirit to do something wonderful in our own lives. These are her words: "When you are a little girl you dream of the perfect man, of that perfect person who will make you whole, who will give you reality. He will be handsome, and good, and kind and generous. He will be perfect. Then, as you get older, you revise your expectations downward. After a while, he doesn't have to be so perfect, or handsome, or good. Finally, when you get to be my age, he doesn't have to be handsome, good, or loving at all. Anyone will do....even if they are common as dirt! You'll take anyone because you think that,

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alone, you aren't anything. But I've learned something here. I've grown to know that, even alone, single, just by myself, I am something! I have reality!"

She throws his address card away as she leaves the hospital and we see in her face that she is now a woman of inner strength and inner joy. She has a new calmness, attractiveness and energy. The restlessness is gone. She has received the Spirit – the Spirit of her own life. The reader senses that. Now it seems that if she wants to, she will easily find someone good to marry – now that she no longer desperately needs to.

Pentecost is not an abstract mystery; not just an event that happened 2000 years ago. It happens still today, every day – in our own parish, and in our own lives. WE are asked to accept the spirit of our actual parish – not some ideal that will never be achieved. And the spirit of our actual lives. When we do this, then we no longer belittle what we have, but like Judith Hearne, know that even with all our inferiorities and frustrations, just by ourselves, we are something, we are the Body of Christ in Apex, North Carolina – and we are the beloved ones of God – filled up with His ever-creating, ever-renewing Spirit. And a new church – and a new person is born. Happy Pentecost! Let the church say amen. (last section adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 5/18/2013)