

“Pentecost Murmuration”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Pentecost Sunday

Edina Morningside Community Church; June 9, 2019

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Romans 8:26-28, 31-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose....

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Last week I attended a lecture by the renowned journalist Ray Suarez entitled “Who Will Be in the Pews in 2040?” Suarez is an experienced researcher of religious communities and trends, as well as an active member of his own Episcopal church. He summarized what studies reveal about religion in twenty-first century America—especially mainline Christianity and Judaism. In short, traditional organized religion is becoming increasingly less appealing, and ever faster with each passing decade. Suarez pointed out that in just seven years, from 2007 to 2014, the percentage of adults who are unaffiliated with a religious identity changed from 16 percent to 23 percent. Seven percent in seven years is dramatic change in these numbers, especially across the United States as a whole. There are now twenty states in the US where “no religion” is the largest category of religious identity. The shift away from organized religion is most pronounced with young adults: 36% of younger millennials are religiously unaffiliated. Researcher David Kinnamon wrote a book called “unChristian”, where people ages 16-29 were asked what came up when they heard the word “Christian”. Of the top ten words that came to mind for participants when they heard “Christian”, seven of them were negative. 75% said hypocritical; 87% said judgmental, and 91% said anti-gay. This is the reputation that Christianity over the last half-century has created in the broader culture—ouch!

I'm afraid that Ray Suarez didn't have a tidy prescription to offer for progressive faith communities who don't fit the stereotype out there. In the face of these sort of cultural headwinds, Suarez offered three suggestions. First, strive for excellence in what we already do well: roll out the welcome mat, meet people in their brokenness and humanity, and keep the lights on with our institutions. Second, be as much dedicated to mission as to prayer, focused on living what we preach, making this faith as tangible and take-home as possible. Third, he suggested we adopt an entrepreneurial attitude: let a thousand flowers of innovation in community life bloom, because we don't know what will take root, grow and succeed in this climate. We live in a period of great religious uncertainty, yet we live with faith nonetheless. Whatever the future holds, we trust in the God who will be present there also, as present as in the earlier communities that brought us to this place.

Uncertainty about the future is nothing new to the church though. In fact, it's right there at the very beginning, on the day of Pentecost. We hear the story each year at this time, fifty days after Easter. Jesus was with the disciples after his resurrection, until the Bible describes his ascension to heaven, leaving the disciples to wonder, "what next?" All the wonder, mystery and power of Jesus' ministry among them has passed, but there's no sense yet of what faithful living will look like in the coming days, months and years. So they do what they know how to do. They gather in Jerusalem with other faithful Jews from around the known world, prepared to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost at the temple. Then the Holy Spirit shows up in the powerful sounds of rushing wind and tongue-like flames that hover over the heads of disciples, who begin speaking in all the languages of the world. Acts describes how they are led by the Spirit out into the busy streets of Jerusalem, cause a commotion, and use the global voices they now know to tell of Jesus and God's love. Note the resonance with what Suarez describes for our own time: 1) they keep the flame of faith alive by their loyalty to religious practice, 2) God sends them out into the streets on a mission, and 3) they use a multitude of languages to meet people where they are in order to share good news. Everything else that's come in the two millennia afterward—churches, basilicas, cathedrals, liturgies—all of it stems from this moment. Who could have known then where it would go next? But this is how it is with the Holy Spirit of God that Jesus promised. She inspires the imagination, fires the heart, and makes possible more than we can imagine by ourselves.

The Holy Spirit is sometimes shown as a bird, after the dove-like form that descended on Jesus at his baptism. Peter Marty, publisher of the *Christian Century* magazine, sees Holy Spirit lessons for the church now in how great flocks of birds fly together. He describes a flock of starlings gathered in formation:

Thousands of these tiny birds flock together, swooping, dipping, and climbing in graceful uniformity. The sudden swelling or contracting of a flock is one of the most fascinating phenomena known to nature. ...Thanks to high-speed photography, researchers today know why starlings interact so coherently and how they avoid midair collisions. Each starling pays attention only to six or seven surrounding birds. There is no designated leader. Any bird can initiate a change of direction. A consensus among hundreds or even thousands of birds can emerge within 50 milliseconds.¹

This is instructive for Christians who gather in our own Holy Spirit murmurings, isn't it? Peter Marty continues: "*congregations that know how to move with spontaneity, but which enjoy order within that spontaneity, are [such] congregations. They don't obsess over rules, yet they understand good process. They don't have a hierarchical plan for every new initiative, yet things get accomplished. They don't expect everybody to know everybody else, yet groups of people do purposeful things and build intimate community. Through the interplay of believers trying to find their way together, [such] congregations build a coherent and meaningful life.*" As with the believers on that first Pentecost arrival of the Holy Spirit, so it is with us now. Even though we may not know the exact forms that faith will take in the next years or decades, we trust the Spirit's guidance. And we work together to build a church with enough communication to keep us together, yet with enough freedom for the Spirit to keep leading us in new directions.

At the end of the day, as a pastor and as church that has been sustained to this point, we trust God's guidance even when we don't know the path ourselves. The promise of Paul to the church at Rome remains evergreen for the church, for each graduate and person starting a new journey, and for every person of faith gathered in the mystery of this hour. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?", Paul asks, Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thanks be to God for this eternal reassurance. "Come, Holy Spirit—Move, breathe and work among us. Come, O come!" Amen.

¹ Peter W. Marty, "From the publisher", *The Christian Century* (May 23, 2018; pg. 3).