

Spirit of Life

Readings: 'Gate A-4' by Naomi Shihab Nye
'A Brave and Startling Truth' by Maya Angelou
Acts 2:1-18, read in English, French, German, Latin, Serbian, and Spanish

I'm sure you caught every word of that, right? Don't worry. I'll explain that beautiful cacophony in a few minutes.

Today, we're focusing our service on Pentecost, my favorite Christian holiday. Our Christian neighbors, friends and fellow congregants won't be celebrating it for another few weeks, but I'm taking liberties with time to be able to share this holiday I love with you.

Pentecost is the celebration of an event described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles in the Christian Scriptures. The Book of Acts is a retelling of the lives of the earliest Jesus followers. It isn't history – history as an academic discipline hadn't been invented yet. It was the oral tradition passed down about the people who spread the teachings of Jesus and created the first communities based on those teachings.

In the very beginning of the story, Pentecost happens. Fifty days after the events of Easter, Jesus' followers gathered in Jerusalem. They were there to celebrate a Jewish holiday, Shavout, which commemorates God giving the Torah, the holy text, to the people of Israel. This holiday is still marked by Jews today, often with dedicated Torah study.

Back to Acts, the followers of Jesus were in Jerusalem to celebrate, but they were not sure what would happen to them. We know that Christianity later became a tremendously influential force, but the first followers of Jesus didn't know that. It was a time of transition, grief, anxiety, and despair. What would happen to this now-leaderless community? How would they be together without Jesus to guide them? How would they be able to live their truth?

Then, something amazing happened. First, there was a loud sound, like the rush of wind. Then, it looked like everyone had a flame on top of their head. And then all of them began to speak their truth about God. And then something even more amazing than flames on top of their heads happened. Now First Century Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city, a diverse place with people from all over Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and Western Asia living there. They spoke many languages – and each of them heard the Jesus followers speaking a language that they understood.

Beth and our other readers listed off the places all the people who heard and understood the disciples using the place names known by the community who formed the text. I'm going to read you an updated translation with the place names in use today:

They say:

We are from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. We are residents of Iraq, Israel and many parts of Turkey, including near Istanbul and Ankara. Some of us are from Egypt and northern Libya, or

visiting from Rome. We are people who were born Jewish and people who converted to Judaism. We are from the island of Crete and from Saudi Arabia. But we all hear the apostles speaking about God... in our own languages!"

What an amazing moment this is. How powerful it would be for people from all of these places able to speak directly to each other without the challenge of interpretation. Of course, everyone felt amazed and perplexed by what was happening. They started asking, 'What does this mean?'

People tried to make sense of the strange thing that was happening. A few suggest that everyone must be drunk.

Then Peter, the leader of the followers of Jesus, started to speak, to explain what was happening, as he understood it. He said, this is the fulfillment of a prophecy of the Hebrew prophet Joel, who Peter paraphrases:

'God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
And your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
And your young men shall see visions,
And your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
In those days I will pour out my spirit and they shall prophesy.' (NRSV)

Now we can all be skeptical about what actually happened that day in Jerusalem. Tongues of flames? Everyone understanding each other? The historical accuracy isn't what draws me to this story. It is the vision – the two visions. One of world community. One of everyone speaking their truth.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. While this story, the moment when everyone hears others speaking their own language isn't the full establishment of peace, liberty, and justice – it is a powerful start. This vision of a world community of peace, liberty and justice for all was for a long time, my favorite of our principles. It guided me as I studied international relations in college, believing that I might be the one to negotiate resolutions to seemingly unsolvable conflicts and create a just and lasting peace in the world. It guided me as I worked with peace activists in Serbia, where I learned the language I so rarely get to use. And then it guided me as I came back to this country and answered a call to ministry.

There were parts in my formation where I had to explain my international experience, where individuals and congregations were confused about what seemed like a disjointed trajectory... That makes sense and it doesn't. Part of my story is a narrowing of focus. Going from a youthful ambition to create world community in one fell swoop, to the realization of my own limitations and the knowledge that peace, liberty, and justice is not something that can be imposed externally.

Which brings me here, to our congregation. I am here, in part, because I think small groups of committed people are the only thing that changes the world. It's hard, slow, work – being together and doing the work of love. Showing up to one another and speaking the truth as we understand it, working together for common purpose sometimes changes us as much as it changes the world – and it's the only way I know to create peace, justice, and liberty.

If there is to be a world community of peace, liberty, and justice for all, it starts here. It starts by sharing cookies in the airport. It starts in relationships of trust and care. As Lao-Tse, the ancient Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, teaches,

If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart.

It is no accident that I decided to preach this vision on this the Sunday of our annual meeting. When our service ends, we will grab a plate of food and come back into this room, where members of the church will elect officers, pass a budget for the coming fiscal year, and vote to authorize a review and possible revisions of our church constitution. How do we create a microcosm of the world we dream about as practice our democracy? This means listening to one another and discerning together and taking the next best step forward, knowing that outcomes are always uncertain. This does not mean uniformity of opinion or belief, but engaging our differences with respect and care. In this time that our national democracy is under threat, we especially need to attend to the democratic process in our congregation. We need the practice of healthy democracy here to know how to scale up to our communities, our counties, our state, our country.

I especially challenge us to live our democratic values as we prepare to talk about money, the proposed church budget for next year. Money is a topic that is emotionally fraught for many of us. So many of us have money and shame is a tightly wound knot in our chest. How might we unravel that? I'm not entirely sure... but I have a vision. What would it look like for our congregation to be as healthy in our conversations about money as we are when talking about sexuality with our children? Our comprehensive sexuality education program is a gem of this church and, I believe, has the potential to change the world. How do we bring the same values of justice, inclusion, truth-telling, and responsibility to our conversations about money? I have a vision; I'm not sure how we get there from here. I name this hoping that we might wrestle with this and chart a course together.

Now, the second Pentecost vision that speaks to me. Everyone speaking their truth. With Jesus gone, the people are searching for a leader, a new prophet to take his place. And Peter declares that everyone gets to take up that mantle of truth-telling.

'God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
And your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
And your young men shall see visions,
And your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
In those days I will pour out my spirit and they shall prophesy.'

The spirit of life comes unto everyone. Everybody is in the circle of truth-telling. Young and old, men and women, slave and free. To our modern ear, we might think a few more identities should be added to that list: national origin, sexual orientation, citizenship status, race, and more, but Peter was saying everybody in with the categories he knew at the time.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the priesthood and prophethood of all believers, that each of us can seek and find truth, that each of us is a moral agent and a moral decision-maker. And here, in this congregation, we hope you share your truth with the rest of us. We are here to learn together – in small groups like chalice circles and religious education classes, in worship together, and yes, even in our annual congregational meeting. I am enriched when you all share your truth – especially when it's not the same truth that I hold. Sharing your visions and your dreams helps us all grow and learn and create the beautiful harmony that is this congregation.

As I said before, I love Pentecost. It is not just me. Pentecost is a special day for my immediate family. My husband Brian and I chose Pentecost as the date for our children's baptisms at Saint Luke's, the Episcopal church my husband attends. And while I have lots of feelings about the ritual of baptism, I am excited to pass on this day as a worthy day for my children. To give them a close connection to the vision of world community and the proclamation that all can speak truth. For similar reasons, I chose Pentecost as the date of my ordination. I try to keep the visions of Pentecost – world community and the prophethood of all believers at the core of my ministry. Having my ordination anniversary fall on Pentecost is an annual reminder and chance to reorient to the values I seek to embody in my work.

I was ordained into the Unitarian Universalist ministry five years ago next month, by the church in Tennessee that I served before I chose People's Church and you all chose me. It was beautiful day, a culmination of the work of ministerial formation – and a continuation of the work of ministry. I was serving that church the interim minister, so they knew as they voted to ordain me that we would not be together long. It was a generous act. They were ordaining me to serve them for a short time and our larger faith for much longer. On that day, right after the members of that congregation, the Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Congregation spoke in unison to ordain me, they offered me a blessing. I want to share it with you, both the words and the blessing itself:

Wherever you may be called, we would have you live courageously and joyfully in a world of pain and promise.

May you speak and act in the spirit of love, wisdom, and compassion.

May you live by the principles of our shared faith.

We send you forward into your ministry to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.

So, People's people, wherever you may be called, may you live courageously and joyfully in a world of pain and promise.

May you speak and act in the spirit of love, wisdom, and compassion.

May you live by the principles of our shared faith.

I send you forward... to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.