

June 4, 2017
The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21
Psalm 104: 24-34,35b
I Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 7: 37-39

What comes to mind when you hear the term “Holy Roller”?

I got curious about our perceptions of this term so I looked it up. The basic consensus from multiple sources was that being a holy roller has something to do with religious fervor, some type of deep, ecstatic religious expression. However, some sources made special note that this term is usually used in a derogatory way.

I remember growing up and hearing my grandmother talk about the folks who went to the church next door to her house. On hot summer Sundays, the church windows would be open, and she would turn her nose up just a bit and roll her eyes as she talked about the loud surge of sounds that would come from within and she always referred to them as “those Pentecostals.” I heard stories about my aunt who went to a rather charismatic church where as family legend told the story people were literally rolling in the aisles and ladies had bobby pins flying out of their hair. My dad called them “those Holy Rollers.” When I was once in Israel watching a group of people be baptized in the Jordan River, I saw them speak in tongues and pass out from the sheer emotion of the moment. One of my students referred to them as, “those people who aren’t feeling very well.”

Either way you look at it, “those” people weren’t like us. In many ways, they were a lot like the folks in Acts. The people who make us a little nervous, so much so that we need to put labels on them to distinguish ourselves from them – they’ve had a little too much to drink, they don’t worship like I do, they are doing it all for show.

We are always a bit suspicious of things out of the ordinary, things we can’t quite explain, especially when it comes to religion. And, it goes without saying that as Episcopalians we clearly thrive on order and predictability. We don’t throw up our hands too often on Sunday, in fact I have never seen it happen here. We don’t give a lot of “amens” or “Praise Jesus”. And, it’s rare that I hear people talk much about the Holy Spirit moving them in some ecstatic way. At best, it may move us in a very controlled, socially acceptable way.

The Holy Spirit, as we read about it in scripture, is anything but predictable, orderly, or socially acceptable. As a result, we tend to stick with things in our faith that are a bit more straightforward. Things that make sense in a very tangible way. And so the thought that this Spirit would come down upon so many on Pentecost, this Spirit that rushes in like a violent wind and changes things, that unites even the most diverse of crowds can be unsettling. So we label one another and divide ourselves so that we begin to put order back in place. It’s a common human reaction to things that are unfamiliar. However, that doesn’t mean it’s a good

thing – this need for order.

Our need for concreteness in our faith, for predictability, has too often resulted in a great divide for us as Christians. It doesn't take much effort to look around and see a lot of folks claiming Jesus just for themselves. Making decisions about who is in and who is out based on their singular concrete notion of faith. Outlining a specific way to believe and worship. There are those of us who are right. And, well, there are "those people."

Maybe you know what I am talking about – the attempt that we all too often make to create a religion that is easy, that is always clear and understandable, that makes reasonable sense. But the result is that we start to leave a whole lot of people out.

I remember struggling with this for years and was always struck when I read texts like Acts which talked about the beautiful diversity of people coming together across traditions, across cultures to experience something bold and expansive on the day of Pentecost. This new church that was being created wasn't afraid to welcome everyone in. I began to wonder – had my view of religion been too small? Why was it so hard for us to do the same sort of radical welcome today? Not just in our churches but in our communities?

When I was in seminary I had one of the most inspiring professors who has ever taught at Union Seminary in New York. His name is Christopher Morse and he has a way of making every lecture an inspirational, life-changing sermon. And, when he spoke about the work of the Holy Spirit his face would light up and his words were layered with a deep devotion to this part of God that I didn't really know much about at the time beyond the negative associations I grew up hearing. Yet, he never talked about "those people". He certainly never relegated the Holy Spirit to holy rollers or Pentecostals. Instead, he talked about us. All of us.

What he instilled in me was that God is more expansive, more inclusive, more loving than I had ever understood before. And, that that expansive love is poured out to creation through the work of the Holy Spirit. As it says in Acts, God declared, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." That's talking about everyone. This became for me the most important lesson I learned in seminary.

It took away my need for concreteness. It took away my need for explanations and definitions. It made me think twice when I heard others talk about the "right way" to do religion. There was something so valuable for me personally about letting go of the need to know certainties and to instead live in the simple knowledge that God is there – not just for me, but for every single person no matter who they are, where they are from, or how they practice their faith. In other words, I began to understand the Holy Spirit as that aspect of God that reaches out beyond our boundaries and definitions, beyond the things we understand and comprehend and says there is so much more love than you could ever imagine. No distinctions. End of story.

The Holy Spirit would have it no other way. And, we should accept no less for ourselves.

This past week, I had the honor to hear our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry speak. He said something that I think we all need to hear. He said – you know, we Christians haven't always done a very good job of loving our neighbor. In fact, we've all too often gotten a bad reputation for exclusive, harmful behavior against folks we might deem as not-as-good-as-ourselves. You know what I mean. You hear the negative opinions of Christians all the time especially from people who have been hurt by the church or hurt by someone who called themselves a follower of Jesus. Our boundaries have too often created deep, painful scars and as Bishop Curry challenged us – we can do better!

We have the incredible opportunity to be examples of what we know to be true about our faith, a faith that welcomes, a faith that loves, a faith that should have no resemblance to the prejudice and hate that some may claim in the name of a religion. On Pentecost, there is no longer "those" people and the rest of us. There is only "all of us." Understanding one another, coming together to build something that we can all be proud of.

It's that kind of faith that we are called to bring forth in the world. A faith that comforts, a faith that welcomes, a faith that loves and a faith that heals through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. All of us. Amen.