

Can Pentecost Be Private?

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Pentecost Day around our place is a pretty big shebang. Everybody wears red. The apse is red anyway, and we put red geraniums every place we can cram a pot around the altar. We used to give out red helium balloons and release them in our garden in the middle of the city, until somebody brought up ducks choking. We still put a few in the sanctuary which are floating on the ceiling by the end of the services. We also ask the firemen to ride their truck over from around the corner, and with all the red everywhere, I think we do look like we are on fire.

When it comes time for the Lord's Prayer, everybody says it in whatever language they want to try (with a cheat sheet in the bulletin with French, Latin, German, etc., translations.) It sounds glorious. Most of us have no idea what we are saying. There is just this glorious noise, a cacophony of prayer. And there we are on fire, with all these languages but everybody hearing the prayer really in their own language. And it's Pentecost.

It's our community's party, of course. We ask who we want, like the firemen. We plan the fire. We decide the decibel level of noise. And through the grace of God it works for us. We have our own little private Pentecost. But then you have to ask, "can Pentecost be private?"

When I think about it, our block of the kingdom in midtown Atlanta looks like a lively pentecostalish picture of an on-fire mainstream community. Proud of our over ninety-year commitment to the city, we are into a goodly number of outreach missions to children and teenagers, including a snazzy, new mixed-income day care center. Recovering crack addicts live in a community on our block and share responsibilities around the campus with the resident college students. Together they do some great outreach to the homeless ones who wander through. HIV-infected parishioners have led us into extensive AIDS ministry. We have a network of friendships with a remarkable group of Bosnian refugee families, including Serbs and Croats, some of whom have joined the church.

We have charged into political advocacy following in the footsteps of Ralph McGill and Judge Elbert Tuttle, former vestry members who changed the face of the South. We are also in a consortium of urban churches to develop more effective ministries for homeless folks. Really sometimes, I congratulate myself (quietly) and the parish and God, of course, for pulling all this together. It is a wonderful context in which to minister and preach.

The Drawbacks of Private Pentecost

The only thing is, I am noticing something that is not good. The ministries we like and do best, we do alone. Just like our Pentecost party, our mission seems to be produced and directed by us. We struggle with almost everything that we do collaboratively. Could we be called by God only to venture out on missions that we control? Surely not. And, to be tacky, how do we preach about the failures of collaboration? They really mess up our picture of ourselves.

For instance, since Pentecost Day 1996, we have experienced some character

building opportunities, as they say. First, our ten-year-old alternative high school for dropouts was abruptly relocated into a regular school by the Atlanta Public School Board, partially due to legitimate teacher complaints about facilities. While school was out last summer, we renovated the added space. Evidently, the word about the improvements did not get where it needed to get. We found out a week before school started that school was *not* starting on our block. Half of the kids showed up on our doorstep anyway, and they were not pleased with the change. We were furious. Calls and letters flew back and forth between the institutions — the school board and the home office of the alternative school and us — with much heat—and little light.

Next, out of the blue, we received a shocking fax from the president of the residents' association of a neighboring public housing project. The letter opened with the good news that the community had decided to take on the responsibility for the very active 100-member girls' club that we have supported for three years with volunteers, money, and staff time. However, in the next paragraph, came the bad news. Church volunteers and staff were kicked out of the club, although our money was still welcome.

I tried to get theological on this one and remember that we were Pharaoh and that the Children of Israel needed to be free of us. But then I would forget about Exodus and just get mad. The girls were doing great — juvenile court appearances and pregnancies down, school attendance up. The volunteers — around twenty-five parish women and twelve resident mothers — were unusually free and easy with each other. But somehow, again, the collaborating institutions — the church and the resident association — got across each other without ever really having a down and dirty conversation about why.

So, those are our two big character builders of the past year. I could also tell you about our frustration with the political action network of congregations across Atlanta that, after five years, just cannot get cranked up. Or I could add that negotiations have stalled in the consortium of churches for the center to serve homeless people. Excruciating meeting after meeting, words upon words. Lots of talking. Little hearing. No Pentecost. Again and again, the Word we all profess does not become flesh. Or policy. Or bricks and mortar. Or money. Or even balloons. Or whatever the Word of love needs to become to do the hard, grinding work toward reconciliation, which is, in my mind, the mission of the church in every generation.

It is mighty hard to collaborate on any mission of reconciliation when the erstwhile collaborating bodies are not working on getting reconciled with each other. It frightens me that at a time when we have just got to make complex *ongoing* collaborations work effectively, a lot of committed churches and agencies and communities I see are tired of trying to be on mission with others. Too many of us are settling for our own private pentecosts where we control the decibels and plan the fires. Which kind of misses the point, doesn't it?

It occurs to me that thirty years ago, we knew how to fight the big obvious and noble fights for justice when all was black and white. Now how do we hang in with each other to bicker about the critical and murkier details of justice? How do we duke it out with our *allies*, reach consensus, and then act out together what God has called us to be and do?

I think we must talk much more honestly — not just with those whom we know have a vastly different agenda — but we have got to risk hard, perhaps high decibel

conversations with those with whom we share a mission agenda, with other churches and private and public social service agencies and the poor. We are too cordial until we disagree and then we tend to back away and quit on each other.

We desperately need the Holy Spirit to give to us and to our would-be partners in God's work the same gutsy, passionate voices that filled the air at Pentecost. But you can't really have Pentecost without people tolerating some fire and a lot of noise. I would like to think with you about how preaching might raise our toleration levels, whether we want them raised or not. So here are two little preaching stories with a few grumbles from me sandwiched in.

A Surprise Pentecost Day

I want to tell a thirty-year-old story about a sermon that went way out of control. A friend was delivering the sermon to his parish in downtown Macon, Georgia, on a Sunday in the late sixties. As you know, the whole country was in an uproar with Vietnam and civil rights marches and women waking up and young people finding spectacular ways to be outrageous.

All of this was swirling around his congregation, which included city fathers, who made it clear to their young rector that on Sundays they wanted to rest from the unrest. They wanted to come to church and slip peacefully into the rhythms of the prayer book and then hear an uplifting, well-thought-out sermon about love or something, sing a few rousing hymns, say the old familiar prayers, including "bemoaning their manifold sins," and then they wanted to be done with it and go home.

Newcomers were showing up in church, some in jeans and long hair, even rock musicians. The newcomers got involved in outreach ministries serving the poor, which was sort of okay with the church leaders. But the newcomers also wanted the poor and anybody else to come to church which was not okay. They even put an advertisement in the paper with the Sunday service schedule and a picture of a black sheep and the words "Come As You Are."

Inviting even more strange people to flock to the church through the newspaper, with the connotation that some of the sheep might be black, was the last straw for the traditionalists. One woman mailed a letter to the entire parish in which she stated that the reach of the outreach people had exceeded the grasp of any sensible person by a long shot.

Thus, lack of appreciation pervaded the atmosphere on that Sunday. The lessons included an encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees when Jesus reminds them of Isaiah. "... as it is written, *'This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me'* . . . *You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition*" (Mark 7:6b-8).

Well, what more solid scriptural platform could you want? The priest quoted the text and launched, subtly of course, into repenting the traditionalists' sins. He spoke with assurance, deftly weaving the stories of Isaiah's community and Jesus' crowd and the world of Macon, Georgia. He described the parallels in a gently ironic tone, and he looked out over the congregation who seemed transfixed. If the truth were to be told he was pleased with himself. Then as he paused for breath, the unthinkable happened.

A lady stood up. Not one of the new casual types who might be standing to applaud and say "right on." Oh no, the lady who stood was an old-timer, in fact she was the one who had written the letter denouncing the newspaper advertisement. It flashed

through his mind that she was definitely not standing to applaud or say "right on."

Instead she *talked back*. Instead she said, "do you mean to say we are wrong? Do you mean to say that for all these years we have been wrong?"

Then the young rector opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. And he stood in the pulpit. For a moment, all was silence. And then another voice in the congregation spoke up and then another and then another. And people talked of trying to become part of church and being frozen out. And others mourned the loss of respect for traditions held dear. And some yelled in anger and some said they were afraid of what the church and the whole world were coming to. And many people cried.

The congregation argued with itself for about twenty minutes. And the young rector stood in the pulpit. And listened. Then for a moment all was silence again. And he said, "I don't know what to do. What do we do now?" And someone said, "well, we might as well do Eucharist."

And they made Eucharist, and the young rector said that by the time he got home, he was a changed preacher. Because he never got into the pulpit again without remembering the possibility of somebody talking back. And he never spoke from the pulpit again without remembering that perhaps the gospel would not be heard in his well-chosen words. Perhaps the gospel would be heard instead, by him and everybody else, through the interruption.

And of course you know the rest of the story. Like Paul and the Gentiles or Nixon and the Chinese, the enraged traditional woman became the instrument of reconciliation between the old-timers and the new people. She was the first woman ever on the vestry, and largely through her sponsorship, the first female priest in Georgia came to that congregation. And through the grace of God in her and some others, the doors of the church opened much wider to invite strangers in and to send people out to love and serve.

Me Grumbling Again

She stood up in her day when the real conversation, the one underneath the sermons and the platitudes, needed to catch fire, first in her own faith community. And there was a big cacophony of noise. And then there was Pentecost when each began to hear the other, perhaps because people risked speaking their little, limited pieces of truth which then became available for grace.

Surely there are a lot of places in our land that could use a big dose of Pentecost right now. But let's think small. Wouldn't you love to go to what you know will be a dull and dutiful gathering, whatever is normally your most lifeless meeting, and watch it catch fire? Would not we all love to live more deeply than the distancing, guarded politeness which is so exhausting and sucks the life out of our individual and corporate relationships? I am thinking in particular of interracial relationships.

For instance, I tend to keep my mouth shut in the clergy meetings of our citywide political action network. I am not alone. We don't talk back to each other or interrupt each other or hold each other accountable. I remember one such meeting when a black pastor shook his head wearily and said, "I am so tired of teaching white people," and I believe he really was. At that very moment, I had been thinking how tired I was of getting lectured at. That would have been a great time to be inappropriate and interrupt and talk back and see what happens. Maybe we would get past the lofty theological and philosophical ideals we all *have* to say we agree on and risk working to hammer

out the critical economic and political details where we don't see eye to eye. (I'm betting that in that particular group, unless we engage, the surface agenda will get set by the black clergy and then the white clergy will agree passively and won't lift a hand. We need a little train wreck there before we get to Pentecost.)

Another for instance. How can my parish salvage our relationship with the public housing community that kicked us out? If it is to be salvaged, we will have to talk together about how we have treated each other. Maybe we in the parish ought to say how much it hurt to be cast out. Maybe we ought to say how worried we have been about what the girls who had learned to trust us must think in our absence with no good-byes allowed. Or maybe the community ought to say that the way we related to their children was painful or destructive for the children and why. Or maybe the mothers would say they really resented us sweeping in for a few glitzy hours a week and leaving them with the harder jobs of child-rearing. Who knows what we would say to each other? It might be a train wreck. But then we might have Pentecost and see and hear each other and understand in our own languages.

Another Surprise Pentecost

Another sermon story, this one preached by a colleague at our parish just this past fall. A lot of hard stuff had happened in the parish. Frankly his voice was not the one I would have expected to start Pentecost. He is the first black priest ever on staff at All Saints'. He had been with us for two years but I did not think he was really *with us*. He sat quietly in staff meetings. He exchanged pleasantries with parishioners. He preached eloquently, but his sermons were like lovely watercolors, pretty and somehow fragile. His office is next to mine, and I tried to chat with him from time to time. He was always gracious but distant. He is deaf, and I always wondered if he cut off his hearing aid when he got bored like my grandmother.

As I mentioned, our parish was stressed. The rector had very recently announced his resignation after fifteen years. One of our young colleagues had separated from his wife and resigned his ministry abruptly the week before. This was his last Sunday. On a personal note, my father had died two weeks before, and it was my first Sunday back. We had also just received the fax kicking us out of the housing project girls' club. I was barely putting one foot in front of the other, which was also true for others in the parish for obvious reasons.

I saw George was the preacher, and I thought well, he'll do something lovely, but at this point who cares. His text was *You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien for you were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Exodus 22.21).

And then he said to this befuddled congregation, of gift givers and problem solvers and competent people who do so many things so well, that there are moments when we are in Egypt rather than in Jerusalem; when we are aliens rather than citizens; when we are problems rather than answers. And he said for a lot of you perhaps today is such a moment. I perked up.

Then he told us about being an army chaplain entrusted with the duty of breaking the news to families that their sons had died in the Vietnam War. And he remembered a day in Texas when he did that awful job with a mother and father as well as he could, only to come back to the base and hear that they had complained of his presence to the post commander. The commander put out an order that from now on, no black chaplains should go to white families because it was too upsetting.

We are all listening now.

Then he quoted W.E.B. Dubois who said, "Between me and another world, there is always the unasked question; . . . 'How does it feel to be a problem?'" And George said when you live among others, your life depends on their acceptance. You live by their rules. And yet, you must reject their rules and their ways if they are not your own.

I began to picture what his life with us must be. The hospital call to an old woman. The first premarital appointment with an unknown couple. Our insistence that he write a manuscript for sermons because we publish sermons, although after twenty-five years of preaching, he didn't use a manuscript. The everyday conversations with parishioners and with staff and the unasked questions in those conversations. No wonder he has been quiet. The thousand daily decisions he must have made as to when to live by our rules and when to reject our rules and ways because they are not his own.

Then he did something that I have been longing for from somebody but did not know it. This black man did not leave us to ponder his story alone. He did not just teach us. He let us *in*. He spoke to the women who had been kicked out of the girls' club, and said, you have been aliens, too. You have been problems, too, for the people in that housing project. They rejected you. You know what that feels like.

And he looked at the young priest whose life had exploded through some self-destructive behavior and who was now leaving us because he was a problem. And George told him how he loved him. And we all cried the tears that needed to be cried. Because we loved the young guy, too, and his behavior had hurt some of us and now he was leaving us. And George helped us to face all that.

And then he made us laugh. Because he told us about a meeting of black Episcopalians and that he really did not want to admit to them that he was at a white church. We, who are so proud of our little uptown pentecost block, loved him for not wanting to claim us. And for telling us.

He spoke his piece of truth for that day. We trusted him. And we became for the moment a group of people who were remembering together what it feels like to be hurt, to be afraid, to be wounded, to be rejected.

Which is where Pentecost begins, doesn't it? Not with competent problem solvers but with a group that is crazy enough to admit weakness and corruption to each other. Not with orchestrated fires and measured decibels but in wild collaboration. Not in being the best and cutest little perfect kingdom for Christ in the world, but in being a community that knows, oh God, we need You. We really need You. Help us listen for You in the cacophony and see You in the flames.