

Protagonist Corner

Pentecost: The Miracle of Hearing

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“After September 11” has become central to our common liturgy. “Everything has changed since 9/11” is a familiar introduction. Maybe it is an exaggeration to say “everything” has changed, but we do see and hear things differently after that horrendous morning. Does it mean that anything will change in our behavior?

Let me exhort you to consider an essential change in the way we go about being the church. *We need to learn how to listen to each other.* I know that sounds trite and a bit simplistic. However, I am here to testify that I have experienced what can happen when we listen to others, and it can be as miraculous as the Pentecost experience. “How is it that we hear each other, each of us, in our own natural language?” (Acts 2:8).

I am convinced that the most miraculous thing that happened at Pentecost is this: they heard each other! But I have had a hard time comprehending this incredible announcement. It doesn’t happen often in my neighborhood as I make my rounds. At a Presbytery meeting recently we were debating another amendment to the Book of Order on ordination. The debate had rules: dueling banjos—I mean speakers—for two minutes each. The bell rang when time was up. Next speaker. Some speakers played the equivalent of the old sword drill, quoting verses back and forth. “Remember what it says in Romans?” “But I am a John 3:16 person myself.” For the most part the punches and counterpunches were civil. But instead of listening, each speaker was trying to score points. I came away wondering if this is the best we can do as a community that claims to have been born at Pentecost.

I believe there is a better way. I believe it because I have experienced what the Holy Spirit can do when we are open to God’s presence among us. In the Easter issue of this publication, Kimberly Richter describes the Campbell Scholar 2001 experience, in which she and I participated as U.S. pastors with six other pastors and teachers, most of whom spoke languages different from ours. I hope you will read her excellent article that describes this remarkable experience. We had the luxury of getting together for eight weeks, listening to the Bible, church history, and each other. It was in conversation with each other that we sought to hear what God was saying to us and to the church. What happened was that we heard each other. We gathered each day around a table, which became a sacramental experience that had a profound impact on my life. It was hard work and uncomfortable at times, because I had to look honestly at the way I was living out my faith in an affluent culture surrounded by such unspeakable pain and suffering. *We listened to each other and our lives were changed.*

In the town where I live, several churches from different backgrounds and with a variety of traditions have come together and are transforming a neighborhood. This area had been considered a dangerous place, with substandard housing and drug deals occurring on the street corners. The transformation is miraculous, but it did not begin with programs. It began with a two-year commitment on the part of a group of pastors to meet regularly for prayer and Bible study. They came from diverse ethnic and theological backgrounds. “We had to be together in the Word and prayer, so we could

learn to trust each other,” said one of the pastors. *They listened to each other and their lives were changed.*

We need to find better ways to be the church of Jesus Christ. God’s spirit led the Campbell Scholars to believe this is a critical moment in the life of the Church, a time to listen in order to remove barriers that separate us and to strengthen the unity of the church. The affirmation that we believe in “the holy catholic Church” is not an add-on at the end of the creed. Rather, it is central to the mission and integrity of the church “after September 11.” As the Campbell Scholars 2001 put it,

The question is no longer, what is the unity of the church? The question is rather, what hope is there for a world so divided? What hope is there for a world so entwined that all humankind and even the entire Earth share a common destiny of life or death? What hope is there for a world so divided that events such as genocide in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing can take place, and have been taking place for quite some time, without the world being moved to compassionate action? For the world, these are indeed questions of life or death.

They are also questions of life or death for the church. If in this hour the Christian church cannot somehow witness to a unity and reconciliation that goes beyond partisanship, nationality, or theological stance, we shall be like salt that has lost its taste, and should not be surprised if the Lord of history casts us out to be trampled by all (Matt. 5:13).

The time has come for all Christians to proclaim with renewed energy the mystery of God’s will, made known to us, “as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). (“Our Common Word for Uncommon Times,” *Journal for Preachers* 25 [Lent 2002]: 40-41)

At such a time as this, it is essential for us to find a better way. To talk about further dividing the body of Christ while the world is desperately looking for a sign of unifying hope is to deny our Lord. Remember the prayer he prayed that we might be one, so that the world may believe? (John 17:23). How can we have a credible witness if we are further dividing the body of Christ rather than taking the time to listen to each other in order to build bridges of understanding?

During this Pentecost season, let us commit ourselves to letting the miracle of Pentecost happen among us. It can be something as simple as beginning a conversation with a colleague with whom you have theological differences about things that matter in your faith journey, or forming a group of people who differ from you to pray and listen to scripture together, seeking the mind of Christ for the mission of the church.

Such experiences will put you in good company. You’ll be in the company of the late J. Randolph Taylor, who inspired many of us with his tireless effort to restore the unity of the Presbyterian Church; and in the company of John Calvin, who offered to cross oceans for the sake of the unity of the church; and in the company of our Lord, who took the time to listen to a Samaritan woman, a tax collector, and a whole assortment of human beings for whom he died. May the Spirit of the Risen Christ once again empower the church as it did on Pentecost “when they heard each other.”