

Preaching Pentecost to the “Nones”

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I don't know about you, but I am somewhat confused regarding the religious-non religious landscape in the United States. In the recent Gallup study documented in the book *God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, Editor-in-Chief Frank Newport makes the case that religion is as alive and powerful as it's ever been in America. In fact, the Gallup research projects that religion may be more significant in the years ahead. Perhaps, they note, “we may be on the cusp of a religious renaissance.”¹

On the other hand, The Pew Forum on Religion's recent study notes that the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow rapidly. One-fifth of the U.S. public and nearly one-third of adults under the age of thirty are religiously unaffiliated today. That number reflects the highest percentage ever in the Pew Research Center polling.

So, what are we to make of these findings? Furthermore, how do we know what we are dealing with in terms of the church's ministry of preaching? Do we preach in order to convince a non-religious audience of the truth of the gospel? Or, do we get on the cusp of the wave of the new religious renaissance and ride it forward?

I am confused, but here is what I think is happening. Religion as we have known it in previous generations is dying, but this death does not represent a sharp rise in the style of the “New Atheists” such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. The Pew Research indicates that those who describe themselves as “atheist” or “agnostic” have grown less than five percent over the last five years. There is no return to the “secular city.” On the other hand, the number of “nones,” or those who are religiously unaffiliated, has risen nearly twenty percent. Although the Gallup poll projects a rise in religious interest, it does note that “increasingly, Americans don't have a religious identity, or they identify with broad religious labels rather than with specific denominations.”² We are seeing the rise of the “nones” or the “religiously non-affiliated,” while at the same time seeing a continued interest in religion. To the question “Is religion dead or alive?” we would answer “yes.”

We are well enough into the era of post-modernity where people are more open to various forms of spirituality. These forms may not in any way resemble organized religion. The Pew research found that many of the forty-six million unaffiliated adults are in some way religious or spiritual. Two-thirds (sixty-eight percent) of them indicate belief in God. More than one-third of the “nones” classify themselves as “spiritual,” but not “religious.”

In terms of organized religion, notes Diana Butler Bass, “Everyone is in the same situation: a religious bear market. Indeed, the first decade of the twenty-first century could rightly be called the Great Religious Recession.” On the other hand, Butler's research points to the emergence of “a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being...‘born again.’”³ There is a “volatile expression of God's Spirit through mystery, wonder and awe.” We are

moving from “being a religion about God to being an experience of God.”⁴ We are moving from the “what” to the “how” of faith.

Her projections align themselves closely with those of Harvey Cox, who, in his book *The Future of Faith* makes the point that we are undergoing a transformation regarding human experience of the divine. We are moving from an era that Cox characterizes as the “Age of Belief,” in which there was an emphasis on creeds and doctrine, to an “Age of the Spirit” that is characterized as non-dogmatic, non-institutional, and non-hierarchical.⁵ Whatever is happening on the American religious landscape, we can truthfully say that in the coming decades, spirituality will be on the rise, and it may be that the season of Pentecost is a grand opportunity to relate to those people whom we would call the “nones.” In terms of the liturgical year, in the old days, the Age of Belief, Christmas and Easter were times when people returned to the churches. Now we see less and less of that as people are finding spirituality elsewhere. But it could be that Pentecost will become the “outreach” Sunday of the future. If the “nones” come to church at all, they might come to celebrate a festival that is, in many ways, the ultimate “spiritual but not religious feast.”

The Feast of Pentecost as the Feast for the “Nones”

“How,” you may ask, “does a holy day that celebrates the birth of the church attract those who do not even identify with the church?” Pentecost is not a celebration of the birth of the church in the sense that we see institutions today. But it is the beginning of a whole new order of human spirituality. That is something the “nones” can celebrate.

Preaching Pentecost would mean that the traditional ways of celebrating the feast that included a sermon on the Holy Spirit (the “what”) would need to shift to a more dynamic model of celebrating a festival that invites people into the mysterious and wonder-filled world of the Spirit (the “how”). Pentecost Sunday has the potential to be a gifted space where people can find church to be a place of awe, mystery, and wonder. But in order for that to happen, to borrow a phrase from Brian McLaren, “everything must change.”

How Can My Life be Enchanted?

I believe that Pentecost can be preached to the “nones” by addressing a critical “how” question that many of us, including the “nones,” are asking, namely, “How can my life be re-enchanted?” Many people hunger to be wonder struck, to be awed by that which is larger, divine, and mystical. However, being wonder stuck today is no easy task. Most of us living in the modern world suffer from an acute case of what may be called Enchantment Deficit Disorder (EDD). The symptoms of EDD include a loss of a sense of wonder, a skepticism of anything that smacks of the supernatural or the miraculous. On the other hand, EDD has left many people searching for the wonderful, the holy, and the genuinely spiritual.

Enchantment Deficit Disorder is a by-product of the rise of modernity in the Western world. The disease was part of the trade-off we made in an era that was rushing forward in scientific progress. To paraphrase Max Weber from a lecture he delivered in 1918 at Munich University, “If you want to be part of the modern world, grow up and bear the burden of disenchantment.”⁶ During the Enlightenment, people did just that. The highest praise given to a modern was that he or she was “rational,”

or “scientific.” The worse criticism given was that a person was “spiritual but of no earthly good,” or that the person was “superstitious.” And, heaven forbid that people would let emotion enter into so-called “objective reality.”

Christians, in particular Protestant Christians, were part of the modern project of disenchantment. They worked hard to harmonize faith with this era by making faith a rational and scientific enterprise. Christianity during this period of the “Age of Belief” emphasized the rational “truths” of the faith. Moreover, many Christian scholars worked to make Christianity a “scientifically” valid belief. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the EDD virus had so infected the Protestant faith that there were few remnants of mystery remaining. We were people who were “religious, but not spiritual.”

During this heyday of modernity, the season of Pentecost was problematic. Many preachers just did not know what to do on Pentecost Sunday. Here was a feast that upset the whole modern project! Being what James Forbes calls “Holy Spirit shy,” many made attempts to talk about Pentecost without being accused of being overly supernatural or spiritual. Given the biblical texts surrounding Pentecost, they had their work cut out for them.

But now, during this period of “The Great Religious Recession,” we have the opportunity to re-visit the Feast of Pentecost as offering a way forward into a new era of Christian spirituality. The religious “nones” are described as open and hungry for personal spiritual experiences. They long for enchantment. Think of the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and you will get an idea of how deep runs the hunger for enchantment. Pentecost is the feast of enchantment that meets this deep hunger. In this feast there is enchanted Word, enchanted space and time, enchanted community, and enchanted creation.

Pentecost Offers an Enchanted Word.

Preaching during the Age of Belief was more about sharing ideas and beliefs. Such preaching was based upon what Edward Farley called the “bridge paradigm,” linking the truth found in the Bible to the lives of hearers. The Bible used in the bridge paradigm of preaching was dis-enchanted. It was an objectified text that was the victim of the great divorce between the presence of God and the Word of God. In this divorce, the Bible became a text without any “subject-hood” or power of real presence. Preaching out of such a text meant that one traversed the world of ideas and beliefs and stayed away from the mysterious realm of the Spirit.

Now in the “Age of the Spirit,” preaching the Word needs to have a deeper sacramental character. Preaching an enchanted Word does not mean that we revert to some pre-modern literalism or view the Bible as a magical book, but it does call for us to re-vision the ontology of Scripture. Just what is holy Scripture if it is not a scientific document or a historical artifact?

John Webster’s identification of Scripture as a sanctified vessel whose existence is grounded in the Triune life of God helps us move toward an enchanted text.⁷ This understanding of the text requires a robust pneumatology, with the Holy Spirit serving as the self-presence of God.⁸ Preaching such a Word means encountering in Scripture what Karl Barth described as “the world that is God.” This world joins together the Word of God and the Presence of God. Preaching this Word is to actively participate in God’s offering God-self to humanity.

If we look at Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, we see a prototype for the joining of God's presence and God's Word. There was not only the wind that came and blew upon those in the Upper Room, but there was the wind in the words spoken by Peter. As Walter Brueggemann notes regarding the nature of the Spirit to the text, "(I)t is the wind in the words that comes over us, not one more grudging echo of us, but a word from out beyond, and the world begins again, 'very good' indeed."⁹ This holy Wind "destroys and makes new."¹⁰ The word spoken on the Day of Pentecost "cut to the heart," destroying previous categories of belief. But this word also created a new world and a new people. I believe that today's "nones" are hungry for a Word that comes from beyond the trenches of the culture wars and the rhetoric of the left and right. People are hungry for a Word that breathes new life. This Word is found in the feast of Pentecost.

Pentecost offers the possibility of Enchanted Space and Time

The "nones" long for the "thin places" where the veil between this world and the world of the Spirit becomes nearly transparent. Their hunger sends them to visit ancient holy sites where in ages past prayers were chanted and sung. Some of the "nones" walk ancient pilgrimage paths seeking a separate peace or a space inhabited by relics of the past. Such longing is met in the feast of Pentecost. This feast brings about a mysterious and awesome dimension of worship that is a merger of the earthly and celestial celebration of God's presence.

Pentecost is an eschatological festival in the truest sense of the word, effecting transformation that began in the work of Christ. It represents the entrance of the future into the present and the joining of the tongues from the present into the language of the coming order. Furthermore, it represents the incarnation of the life of the triune God into the life of human community. Pentecost is thus a visitation by the Spirit, bringing about a co-mingling of heaven and earth.

"The Pentecost Church stands in the present as the very future of the world," notes Daniela Augustine, "exemplifying the mystery of the Trinitarian communal life in the community of the saints as the ultimate calling and destiny of all creation."¹¹ This future-present event sacramentalizes time and space in which the church's liturgy becomes the charismatic dwelling place for the invisible celestial realm to be made "present, transparent and visible."¹²

Many of the "nones" are searching for sacramental space. The space of their day to day lives has been flooded with the spectacle of pornography and violence. They all hunger for the mystical, for embodied and tangible structures of grace. Disembodied religion that is starkly verbal and rational has no way to meet the needs of those who desire fleshly touch that is holy, who desire to eat bread that nourishes, who long to be bathed in water that cleanses and comforts with the warmth of oil poured out for healing.

Pentecost provides a sacramental space wherein matter and Spirit co-mingle. Bodies are filled with divine presence, and human tongues speak of the mysteries of God. In this space invisible grace is transformed into visible manifestations that say clearly "God is present." People are wonder-stuck with the glory of God being manifest in the midst of common people. Worship becomes a liminal space, a place set between heaven and earth, not here nor there, but here and there.

Pentecost Offers the Gift of Enchanted Community

The Pew Forum's study on religion noted that the religiously unaffiliated attach much less importance to belonging to a community of people with shared values and beliefs than Americans overall. Twenty-eight percent of the unaffiliated say this is very important to them, compared with forty-nine percent of all adults. What do these numbers mean for us in our preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministry?

I believe that these statistics point out that we cannot assume "community as usual" will be attractive to the "nones." Church has become synonymous with groups with shared values and beliefs. We gather around shared centers of value, be those centers a particular doctrine about God or lifestyle interests. But it seems that the "nones" are choosing not to gather around our centers of value and power. The "nones" will not attend "women's groups" or feel the need to be part of "the men's fellowship breakfast." They don't feel the need to attend a worship service where there are people of like-minded beliefs.

On the other hand, all humans have a deep desire to be part of vibrant and authentic human community. They long to be where they are not commodified objects, but valued as beings of dignity and worth. In an age in which there are more human slaves than ever, it is safe to say that the human being has become another object of the industrialist capitalist society. It seems that we cannot escape this repressive message that the "other" is not of value.

Pentecost offers a new order of human community. It is the community that is God. "God in the Spirit of God," notes Peter Hodgson, "is God existing in community."¹³ It is the Holy Spirit who, as our way to God, offers to humanity the gift of this Divine Life. At Pentecost, the deep mystery of the Trinitarian life of God was offered to humanity as a new order of existence.

This order of existence provides an alternative to Babel. The spirit of Babel is one that we can all identify with today. It is the spirit of the homogenous city, that "empire of illusion"¹⁴ that attempts to convince us we are better off in a homogenizing consumer culture. This imperial project was cut short by God's deconstruction of human language. In many ways, Babel is reversed at Pentecost. In the language of the Spirit, humanity is once again united. However, as Augustine points out, there is continuity between the two events in God's "prophetic deconstruction of every imperial consciousness that is inherently homogenizing and violently marginalizing of those who are other and different."¹⁵

Pentecost is thus a uniting and community building festival, but it is also a festival of deconstruction of the "homogenizing shortcuts of empire."¹⁶ The fires of Pentecost do not create a warm soup of human community. Rather, they burn away that which cannot stand in the new order of creation. Those who heard Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost were "cut to the heart" by his words of judgment. Yet his sermon was not only one of judgment against those who rejected Christ; he spoke words of promise that pointed to a new, inclusive community that includes the possibility of "all flesh," slaves and free, sons and daughters, young and old.

The offering of divine hospitality present at Pentecost continues to unfold. As preachers we can offer this radical call as both judgment and promise. To a world "traumatized in its global compression and exhausted political imagination," we can offer a hope for the future of "cosmopolitan hospitality—the future of humanity in the likeness of God."¹⁷ To the world that desires to flatten us into cut-out images

and shrink our souls into nothingness, we preach words of prophetic judgment. This world is not the final word. New tongues are being spoken.

Pentecost and the Enchantment of Nature

The “nones” may be closed to religion, but they seem open to the natural world. The Pew Research noted that more than half (58 percent) say they often feel a deep connection to nature and the earth. The feast of Pentecost offers a way toward bringing that connection into the realm of the spiritual. From the beginning this feast has been an enchanted feast of nature.

Celebrated fifty days after Easter, Pentecost is symbolically and historically related to the Jewish harvest festival of Shavuot or Feast of Weeks. From its inception, this festival brought together the world of nature and the world of the supernatural visitation of God. It commemorated the events of Sinai, especially the giving of the Law, but it also celebrated the harvesting of the wheat. This festival was a day when people could bring the first fruits to the temple, with a processional in which baskets of grain would be loaded on oxen whose horns were gilded and laced with garlands of flowers. These oxen would lead the procession to Jerusalem, accompanied by music and festive parade.

The Eastern churches have kept the harvest theme of Pentecost better than those of us in the west. Christians in Eastern Europe refer to Pentecost as the “green holiday” and so decorate their houses and churches with greenery. In some places processions are made to the fields, where crops are blessed. This celebration often goes hand in hand with the extraordinary service of Kneeling Prayer on Pentecost Sunday. In the Orthodox tradition of Pentecost, there is a remarkable gestalt of nature and grace, history and creation, prayers and harvest.

The bringing together of the “green” and the “red” on the Day of Pentecost points to the beauty of the natural order as already inhabited by God moving ever toward its final consummation when all the cosmos will be filled with the glory of God. The icon of Pentecost portrays this expectation. It depicts the tongues of fire that descended on the Apostles. However, the central figure of the icon is the mythical figure of *Cosmos*. On one hand *Cosmos* is depicted as both dignified and beautiful. He is wearing a crown and regal robes. On the other hand, he is aged, and his crown is tarnished. The icon depicts *Cosmos* as moving out of the darkness that surrounds him toward the rays of the light of Pentecost.

In the icon’s depiction of the cosmos there is a sense that creation is beautiful, containing glory and dignity, yet broken and in need of restoration. The Pentecost icon points to its full sanctification and healing. The author of the book of Romans expresses this already/not yet tension found in creation, noting it will “be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). Using maternal imagery the author continues, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (8:22). Writing post-Pentecost, the author continues, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (8:23).

In the icon of Pentecost and in the letter to the Romans, there is both visitation of the “first fruits” (note the harvest imagery), but also a sense in incompleteness. The beautiful land has not yet arrived fully. All together—the cosmos, redeemed human-

ity, and the Spirit of God—groan for the day of freedom from decay.

On the Day of Pentecost the book of Joel is evoked in the preaching of Peter. On the day when Israel celebrated its grain harvest, Peter calls forth a memory of a time when the Feast of Weeks would have been a time of mourning, not a time of joy. The book of Joel begins with a lament for the wasted and devastated land. This lament surveys the destruction. “Surely, joy withers away among the people,” notes the prophet (1:12). Following the lament there is the call to repentance. This call ushers in a response from God in the form of promise: “I am sending you grains, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations” (2:18-19). Following the promise of restoration, the earth is addressed directly with words of healing of the soil, the plants, and the animals (2:21-24). Following these words, the prophet speaks regarding the people. They, like the earth, will be filled with the new rains. All flesh will receive the Spirit (2:28-29).

If we understand nature, in the words of James K.A. Smith, as being “primed” for the Spirit’s manifestations,¹⁸ then we can view the groaning of creation not merely as desire for that which it has not already tasted, but the longing to be completely filled. We as humans are primed for that visitation, but moreover, the natural world itself desires to be fully indwelt by the Spirit.

Celebrating Pentecost today calls for us to integrate the creation into our worship. This celebration would demand that we go beyond our bringing the color green into our liturgical vestments. It would mean that we take seriously an enchanted worldview in which we see the creation as places of the Spirit’s habitation. The Spirit in creation is not a move into pantheism. Rather, it means that we see all of life as vivified by the Spirit of God. John Calvin’s words that “it is the Spirit who, everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and earth,”¹⁹ have meaning for us today in our attempt to re-enchant nature.

Furthermore, we do not often see Pentecost as a season of lament; however, it may well be the feast that offers opportunity to grieve over the destruction of the earth’s natural resources. As in the era of the prophet Joel, the earth is being devastated and the land mourns. Creation itself groans. It is the victim of horrific abuses of mountain top removal and other attempts to extract its resources without regard to the future. Would not the outpouring of the Spirit today result in sighs too deep for words?

Preaching Pentecost as a green festival would move people from lament to repentance to hopeful and faith-filled practices of earth-keeping. Such preaching would call forth love and respect for the creation. It would invite people to care for the “new poor”—the earth itself.

In the tradition of the Midrash, Mount Sinai bloomed with flowers in anticipation of the giving of the Torah. This description paints an image of an enchanted space where God’s Word and God’s creation co-exist in a beautiful synergy. So too, our Pentecost services can be a place where the Word of the Lord is spoken and flowers bloom. Such an enchanted space would evoke wonder, fear, and awe, not only for the “nones,” but for us all who long to be enchanted.

Concluding Thoughts on our Annual Opportunity to Burn

The Burning Man Festival which is held annually in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada attracts nearly 50,000 people to its week-long celebration of the human spirit and the creative powers inherent in humanity. Based upon principles such as radi-

cal inclusion, gifting, Burning Man is a festival that symbolizes some of the longing present in the religious “nones.” Perhaps we could learn a bit from this festival. Are we holding our festivals that celebrate radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, and nature? Each year, with the festival of Pentecost, we are given opportunity to lay aside institutional traits that the “nones” find challenging and create new forms of life.

We should know, however, that Pentecost festival offers so much more than Burning Man. At the end of Burning Man festival, they “burn the Man,” (the tall wooden structure of a human). Everyone leaves the desert, driving back to their lives as computer analysts, stock brokers, or teachers. In the Festival of Pentecost we hear gifted Word, participate in sacred time and space, and find the natural world enchanted with the Spirit of God. Furthermore, we become enchanted beings who live in the delight of the Divine triune life. That is an enchantment we can take into eternity.

Notes

- 1 The Gallup Blog, “God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America,” Tuesday, December 4, 2012. See also, *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*
- 2 “The Gallup Blog, “God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America.” Tuesday, December 3, 2012.
- 3 Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 5.
- 4 Butler Bass, 110.
- 5 Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
- 6 Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 155.
- 7 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 8 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48.
- 9 Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 34.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Daniela Augustine, *Pentecost, Hospitality, and Transfiguration: Toward a Spirit-inspired Vision of Social Transformation* (Cleveland, Tennessee: CPT Press, 2012), 29.
- 12 Augustine, 36.
- 13 Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 296.
- 14 See Chris Hodge, *Empire of Illusion: The Rise of the Age of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009).
- 15 Augustine, *Pentecost, Hospitality, and Transfiguration*, 30.
- 16 Ibid., 31.
- 17 Ibid., 67.
- 18 James K.A. Smith, “Is the Universe Open to Surprise? Pentecostal Ontology and the Spirit of Naturalism,” a plenary paper presented at the thirty-seventh annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Duke University, March 2008.
- 19 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.14.