**Pentecost June 2019**

**Text:** Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17 [25-27]

**Peace – not as the world gives**

**Peace – not as the world gives**

Have you ever tried hard to bring peace to a situation?

Perhaps it’s in an act of kindness to a marginalized foreign neighbour?

Or in a conversation with someone from a different Christian tradition, who attends a more conservative tradition perhaps – where we make an attempt to listen and be curious?

Or over a glass of wine discussing politics we might bite our tongues and wait for the subject to change so not to offend the other.

Yet in the midst of relating to difference – differences of culture, creed or values - we discover that our best efforts are awkward, and we may continue to create disharmony, because something in us applauds ourselves for being part of the more upright group, or for being on the more correct side…

Our brain chemistry is seemingly hard wired, to group around sameness.

* Researchers have found that we naturally tilt toward others who are more like ourselves and away from those we perceive to be different as an evolutionary survival instinct. Suspicious of others and fearful.
* Researchers have found that we function best when we experience inclusion. And when we sense that we don’t belong we tend to underperform and second guess ourselves. So our internal walls go up when we are confronted with difference.

*Shakil Choudhury, Deep Diversity*

Today, Pentecost, we celebrate God’s vote for diversity.

It is an invitation to live into a new way of being humanity.

**Pentecost my friends, is our hope of peace.**

We are told by the writer of the book of Acts (possibly a compilation from a Christian community surrounding Luke) that the disciples had regrouped in the upper room and they were re-creating their structure of twelve. Twelve men, one for each tribe of Israel to be the apostles. A strong group identity!

It seems that many stories described in the Gospels and Acts, are patterned on Hebrew archetypal stories of what is Christians First Testament.

For part of our identity is forged by our common stories.

This account of the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost is sometimes claimed to be patterned on the mythic account of the Tower Babel.

Babel – where humanity builds a tower so that they would not need to scatter and fill the earth. They build a tower to reach toward up toward God and make a name for themselves.

Brian McLaren says that the “story of Tower of Babel which says that our great dream, when we live in a world of conflict, is to have peace if we would all be the same. If we’d all speak the same language, if we all had the same government, we could finally make everybody the same. And in that story with all of its primitive and powerful, primal imagery, in a strange way, God votes against sameness and God votes for diversity.”

And, so it is here in Acts…

Here the disciples were in one place building up their group identity, living with the fear of losing their lives, dreaming of becoming the Kingdom of Israel.

**And yet Pentecost is a strange revision of the Babel narrative:**

The Babel story ends with God’s intervention – languages are given, confusion and misunderstanding results in scattering

Pentecost does not take us back to one language but a spiritual intervention where we are brought to an understanding of each other across difference.

You from your context and me from mine.

Pentecost is the promise of advancing toward the harmony of cultural diversity (and later in Acts it widens to socio-economic diversity).

*(Miroslav Volf Exclusion and Embrace)*

It is a creation or re-creation account.

The wind (the Ruah) of the Spirit, just as She moved over the waters in Genesis 1 to create in the midst of chaos,

Here she blows into a room or people clustered in their 12 masculine sameness to break them open to those on the outside who were from “every nation under heaven” – opening us up to a new way of unifying humanity – of peace.

The gift of Spirit… a promise, a hope.

Hildegard of Bingen depicts Spirit in marvelous ways: as the life of creatures, as a burning fire that sparks, ignites, inflames and kindles our hearts, as a guide in the fog, a balm for wounds, a shining serenity and an overflowing fountain that spreads to all sides.

Spirit is life, movement, colour, radiance and a stillness that restores, bringing withered sticks and souls alive with the sap of life.

The Spirit purifies, absolves, strengthens, heals, gathers the perplexed, seeks the lost, pours the juice of contrition into hardened hearts and plays music in the soul, melodies of praise and joy. The Spirit awakens mighty hope, blowing winds of renewal everywhere in creation.

*Cited in Clark Pinnock, Flame of Love*

And all this in the midst of our everyday lives – at home, at work, in community, in solitude.

I am grateful for our regular Wednesday contemplative practice group that is developing at St Catherine’s. For it is drawing us deeper to experience the profound love of the Spirit and her gentle nudges toward opening up beyond our fears.

In the writings of Father Thomas Keating (who passed away October last year) he speaks so eloquently of how the Spiritual journey, through contemplative practice opens us up beyond the ‘mythic membership’ of group overidentification to a reflective, self-conscious state.

For as we move deeper in practices of silence through meditation or contemplative prayer or resting with the scriptures in Lectio Divina – we become more deeply aware of our automatic thought patterns.

The ones that bubble up inside of us and reinforce our fears, our need to be needed and seen.

And as we are faced with them, surrounded by God’s love we are invited to gently surrender and grow more deeply in trust.

And our heart opens beyond sameness.

The Spirit glacially transforms us.

Slowly but surely, it is our hope of peace. Each day a new, afresh.

Recently I discovered a moving story how on a university campus in the United States, a student, Derek Black, was outed as a white nationalist, and then was brought into friendship with an Orthodox Jewish gathering over Shabbat meals.

Matthew Stevenson lived upstairs from Derek, and he would sing along when he played country-and-western songs on his guitar — poorly, I might add. But nevertheless, when the news broke of Derek’s white nationalist stance, many people — not everyone, but many people treated Derek very poorly, trying to make his life as miserable as possible, in what I think was maybe a misguided attempt to change the situation. And at that time, Matthew had been hosting these Shabbat dinners in his dorm room every Friday night, along with his close friend, Moshe Ash, and they spoke about it and decided that there was an opportunity. They knew that Derek had grown up in a white nationalist family amongst white nationalist royalty, so to speak, and probably didn’t know any people from the backgrounds that his ideology despised. So, for that reason, Matthew decided, along with Moshe, to invite Derek to come.

Matthew Stevenson shares how every week for two years, Derek came and sat in their midst. They didn’t talk at the meals about his beliefs.

They just offered a place of belonging to a student who was being marginalized.

Matthew describes how the invitations came with intention but also with criticism. Some Jewish students stopped coming because they didn’t want to be around Derek.

While others slowly warmed to the idea.

And my friends in this extreme example, the Ruah, wind of the Spirit blew into that gathering, and Derek Black was challenged by Love.

*From: https://onbeing.org/programs/how-friendship-and-quiet-conversations-transformed-a-white-nationalist-may2018/#transcript*

**Pentecost my friends, is our Christian hope of peace.**

An invitation to live into a new way of being in the midst of North Vancouver diversity.

It is countercultural – for in our anxious times we are given messages to gather around us positive people, people who make us feel good.

Messages that implicitly lead us to form homogenous groups of like-minded sameness.

Richard Rohr says: the fullest expression of Christ is a diverse group of people.

The Spirit is with us and in us.

And it is because of this, that we the body of Christ can continue to say as Jesus did:

“My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid”

Come Holy Spirit.

Amen.