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John 14:8-17
Prophetic Communications

Congratulations! You have successfully survived another American election cycle. Granted, it was only a primary election and a general election still awaits. But last Tuesday's election had its yard signs, its Robo-calls, its endorsements and mud-slinging. It was another round in the American pattern of imperfect public discourse, such as we saw earlier in the debate around health care reform or which we glimpse now in the partisan bickering over Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan.

In light of such examples of uncivil discourse, the question needs to be asked: Is it possible to have faithful conversations anymore? That's the theoretical question for today. But let's make this more personal: Can Christians talk about difficult topics with people with whom we disagree and do so with faithfulness and civility? Can we be a church that is inclusive of all, including those whose positions political, theological, or personal are quite different from our own? Soon we hope to have banners hung once more on the flagpoles out front. One of them will be printed with the word "Welcome." Will we truly mean that? Can we be a church of the East End and beyond, male/female, gay/straight, Democrat/Republican, union and management, white/black/brown/whatever? If that's our goal, how will we live into it?

That is a perfect question for today, Pentecost Sunday. Consider what happened on the first Pentecost. It was a harvest festival in Jerusalem. The streets were crowded; the markets busy; but the disciples were isolated in a room – still rejoicing over the fact that Jesus was alive, yet unsure how to share that news in a city where Jesus had been arrested and crucified seven weeks before. Then came the gift of God's Spirit – a loud wind, a touch from tongues of fire, a spirit that energized them to go out into the streets. Once out there, they began to mingle in the crowd and talk to strangers. Miraculously they spoke in the languages of the foreign visitors – Parthians, Medes, Egyptians, and Arabs. But don't dismiss this as a singular event from long ago. Scripture, as translated into English, says that the crowds were amazed because each heard them in their own native language. In the Greek text it doesn't say "native language," but rather it says "each heard the language in which they were born." The disciples spoke in the languages which people had grown up learning and speaking – deep, personal, idiosyncratic languages. The miracle of Pentecost wasn't that the disciples spoke different languages; the miracle was that they spoke languages folks different from them could hear, appreciate, and even accept.

Let me give a trite example. You meet someone and ask directions, and she replies, “Go north a ¼ mile, then turn east for three blocks, and make a quick turn back south for one block.” You know right then, she’s not from Pittsburgh. I’ve never met a Pittsburgher who gave directions by north, south, east, and west. So you got directions from a stranger and you understood one another’s words, but the conversation wasn’t in our “native” language. Is it possible to have faithful conversations any more? Yes, but both partners have to listen carefully and speak intentionally the language in which each was born.

Faithful conversations are built around respect. Not just polite respect, where we’re nice to someone else hoping that they’ll like us or do what we want them to do. No, I’m talking about a fundamental respect – the quality that sees the other person as an equal or better and treats him or her as a beloved child of God. Legal scholar Stephen Carter recently wrote an article in reference to the Supreme Court and discussed whether justices with extremely opposite viewpoints can be friends, not just colleagues. Carter pointed to the example of Justice Thurgood Marshall, who joined the court in 1967. He said, Marshall insisted that he had no enemies on the court, even among those with whom he strongly disagreed. “Fundamentally Marshall believed in the humanness of those who opposed him... Never did he take the view that another human being, no matter how morally bankrupt, was beneath him.”¹

How do we show that deep level of respect in our conversations? It’s hard. It takes humility and a lot of self-control. It takes a John 14 perspective. In John 14, Philip said to Jesus point-blank, “Show us the Father and I’ll be on board with you.” Jesus replied in effect, “Why do you still need more proof? I am in God and God is in me. Through me, God does God’s works.” Respectful conversations means you speak to others knowing that God is listening. You try to see God’s profile when you look at another person’s face, feel God’s grip when you shake another’s hand, and hear God’s voice when someone speaks words from their heart. You may not trust the face or want to hear the words spoken. But that’s not our starting point. Our faith starting point is that everyone, every-one, equally reflects God’s creation and potentially are all vessels of God’s will on earth. From that starting point, which precedes the speaking of a single word, emerges a faithful conversation.

We need a John 14 perspective and we need an Acts 2 perspective. The Pentecost disciples didn’t leave the Upper Room because they wanted to get some fresh air. They were sent out, pushed out, no, literally scorched and blown out into the crowd. By whom? By God – or more precisely, by God’s Holy Spirit. In John 14, depending on the translation, this Spirit is called the “Advocate,” the “Comforter,” the Spirit of Truth or perhaps the Greek word itself, the Paraclete – the one who stands beside you and sends you out into the world. Think about it: If the whole point of conversation is to communicate, and in this case, the whole point is to communicate “good news,” why would you go about it in such a way so that you will only alienate or anger someone else? The Paraclete, the Spirit, comes to us as a gift, not just on Pentecost, but all the time. We are to trust that gift – we are to accord others full respect – and then we are to open our mouths; and faithful conversation happens.

But back to our earlier scenario: What if the person to whom we speak holds a position fundamentally different from ours? What if their “native language” is foreign to us, because it is built around ideas that are racist or morally flawed? Thurgood Marshall had to serve on the Supreme Court with supporters of segregation, including Justice Abe Fortas who according to F.B.I. files called Marshall a “dumb Negro.”² Does seeking respectful conversation and being inclusive means we can never disagree with someone else or express a viewpoint with a passion that others might find troubling? No, for the simple reason that faithful conversation is also and always prophetic communication.

Go back to Acts 2. What was the message carried out to the crowds by the wind-swept disciples? It wasn't lovey-dovey, warm and fuzzy, why can't we all just get along? It was the story of how Jesus of Nazareth was wrongly crucified by them, by the authorities still walking the streets or presiding at the festival. It was a message that they were wrong about the unstoppable power of death, for Jesus was alive. It was a conversation that ended with a clear appeal to repentance, to turning around, to steering their life in a new direction altogether so that they may be healed, saved, and made whole.

Any faithful conversation will also be prophetic because you can't get to the Pentecost place with an earthly road map. You can't heal the wounds of society with society's own medicine chest. That's where John 14 and Acts 2 come together. Pentecost is about the gift of God's Spirit that sends us out into the world with a world-changing message. This Spirit, in John 14, is the Spirit of Truth, whom “the world cannot receive because the world neither sees the Spirit nor knows the Spirit.” That is the prophetic part of any conversation of faith – the insistence that a Spirit not of this world, a Spirit of Truth, Justice, Change, Forgiveness, and Hope is blowing in our midst. That Spirit will take us and our conversations to places we cannot get to otherwise.

What does that look like? I don't presume to speak for God's Holy Spirit, but let me try to suggest some examples. We get into a conversation about the recent Arizona law which appears to unfairly target Hispanics for racial profiling and deportation risks. We announce how terrible it is, but someone overhears and comments that the problem of illegal immigration is serious in Arizona and laws like this are necessary. We can shut that person down, or we can listen to their story, seeking to be sensitive to their perspective, respectful and inclusive. But what if a wind blows, a flame touches us, and we recognize that this conversation needs to be expanded to discuss the racial profiling that already exists in every state of our Union, especially for African-Americans, who are routinely pulled over for DWB – driving while black. Then the conversation becomes faithful and prophetic. Or we speak out against the wall erected in Jerusalem, and someone argues back that some Palestinians don't recognize Israel's right to exist and have shot missiles at them. So we take time to listen to one another's stories and appreciate the complexity in the entire Israel-Palestine conflict. But before we walk away, the wind picks up and the fire of Pentecost is ignited again, and we begin to question whether U.S. policies and money have made things worse in the Mideast, or ask how the dark forces of nuclear weapons which we first unleashed and which we are instrumental in maintaining in the world have distorted the Mideast conversation so that we, so the speak, no longer see the forest for the trees. That is a faithful, prophetic conversation.

Frederick Douglass has said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”³ John 14 says “This Spirit of Truth the world cannot receive because it neither sees it nor knows it.” Peter in Acts 2 ended his sermon by saying, “Therefore repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls” (Acts 2:38-39).

Faithful conversations begin with an attitude of respect and an openness to difference, for God is the Lord of all. But by the same token, all is on the table when we talk. It is not a question of “balance,” particularly if balanced arguments are simply a device to keep things at a stalemate. For the wind, the Spirit, will blow us to places we may be uncomfortable going. Some may try to avoid such conversation by insisting people of faith don’t talk about these things, since they’re the messy stuff of the world and not the sacred stuff of the sanctuary. To which Pentecost reminds us that God’s Spirit blew the disciples out of their sacred sanctuary into the messy streets of Jerusalem and does the same thing today.

Faithful conversations are prophetic conversations. They try not to control, to create winners and losers, since they speak from a vision that is bigger than that. They will make demands because power doesn’t concede anything without demands. They will include passionate speeches because some things have to be spoken out loud. They will be wind-blown, God-guided, gospel-grounded, persistent, insistent conversations that are not satisfied until what’s right is right for all and is available for all.

Pentecost is when the Spirit sends us out to speak what must be said so that it can be heard.
Pentecost is today!

AMEN

¹ Stephen Carter, “A Bench of Rivals,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2010, p. WK12.

² Ibid.

³ ed. Tavis Smiley, *The Covenant*, 2006, p. xiii.