

“Polarization Problem Prescription”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
June 5, 2022 – Pentecost Sunday
John 14:8-17; Acts 2:1-21

Dear friends, we have a problem -- a polarization problem. Those on the Left can't -- or don't want to -- relate to those on the Right, and those on the Right can't -- or don't want to -- relate to those on the Left. We are polarized in our politics, and we have allowed our political differences, along with the many other differences that exist between us, to be causes for disunity and ongoing division. Here in this land, where our motto is *E Pluribus Unum*, meaning “out of many, one,” it seems that we are becoming less and less united in our manyness as we so commonly do not see our diversity in politics, religion, race, opinion, sexual orientation, and expression as kaleidoscopically beautiful, but as something ugly, dangerous, and undesirable that is an ever-deepening wedge in between us, driving us further and further away from those who differ from or disagree with us.

We're not the first people to have had a polarization problem. Our specific issues may be unique, but the general problem of groups of people being unable to find common ground upon which to stand together is an old one. And we tell many old stories to better understand this old problem. One of these old stories about the old problem is the story of Babel from Genesis chapter 11, in which we are told of the earth's people, sometime after the flood, who gathered themselves together and built a city and then began construction on a tower in it that would reach to heaven. Like the earlier story of Eve and Adam in the garden, people tried to move from where they were as limited mortals to where God is in being unlimited and immortal. And just as the transgression of Adam and Eve, of them eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil to become like God, after being forbidden by God to do so, caused them to experience brokenness in the form of separation from the presence of God and the abundant riches of the garden that God had prepared for them, so too the people of the city that became called Babel did not become gods as they had sought to by building their tower to heaven, but instead experienced brokenness, having their language confused and then being scattered over the face of the whole earth.

At the Pentecost event described in Acts 2, there is a reverse of the old curse. Pentecost was a festival celebrating the first harvest that happened each year 50 days after the beginning of Passover. Like Passover, the festival brought to Jerusalem masses of Jewish people, most of whom did not live in Palestine, but were scattered throughout the Mediterranean region and lands of the Fertile Crescent. Acts tells us that at the first Pentecost after Christ's death and resurrection, when his disciples and other followers had gathered together in one place in Jerusalem, the Spirit (also meaning Wind and Breath) of God came upon them, rushing into the room where they were as a mighty wind and then appearing as tongues of fire that rested upon each of them. The fiery, powerful presence of God was among them, and went within them, as they were filled with God's Breath and then began to breathe out God's message, but in languages or tongues other than their own. Empowered by God, they began to proclaim in these other languages messages of God's deeds of power to the masses of others who had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. Some saw the noisy cacophony as a sign of the disciples' drunkenness, but what it demonstrated was not that the followers of Christ were out of control as they were filled with intoxicating spirits, but that they were under God's control, being filled by God's guiding and empowering Spirit. Reversing the curse of Eden, the presence of God came among them and was closer to them than their own breath. And reversing the curse of Babel, God empowered them and guided them into being united in speaking a message of good news that all could understand. At Pentecost, the diversity of languages and cultures that existed among the world's people were no longer accursed barriers to human unity as diverse people were united in receiving one Spirit-uttered message, even as it came to them as they were with their many differences.

The story of Pentecost is one of God effectively intervening in our fractured world, where we and our relationships with others are broken and in need of repair. At Pentecost, the outpouring of God's Spirit bridged the divides of language and culture that existed between people, and the ongoing story of God's Spirit being present and active among us is one of reconciliation as God continues to bridge divides and bring people together.

God's prescription for us to deal with our own polarization problem -- and so many of our other ills -- is to receive and take in the Spirit that unites. So breathe

in deeply the Breath of God that is freely bestowed to you. Let it fill your lungs and your whole being, that you may become full of God's energizing and empowering life. And then breathe out words of life that heal and promote unity. Instead of trying to use your words to turn other people into what you would have them become, lovingly speak your words to people in language they can understand and receive just as they are as fellow beautiful and beloved children of God. Let the Spirit of Truth speak through you boldly, but only as the building, never destroying, Spirit of Love. Here in this LGBTQ Pride Month, may all your words and all your work be healing, especially for those have been hurt by being told they don't belong and aren't welcome, and may God's Spirit bring wholeness to all among us who have been told we don't belong. As we begin a new church year this morning during our Annual Meeting, may God help our community of faith to grow closer together, that we all might become more trusting of one another and cooperative. May God bless us with unity and peace, and may God bless the world through our love for one another. Amen.