

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Acts 2:1-21

“Shades of White”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

This past week, as we approached Pentecost Sunday, I spent time asking clergy colleagues if they would tell me about fights they have had or currently are having in their churches. One colleague I asked said, “Well they are not really fights, they’re *“spirited disagreements,”* and then he proceeded to give me two examples that sounded like pitched battles to me.

During the week, I asked a total of eight colleagues to tell me about the “spirited disagreements” they have had or were having in their churches and not ONE clergy person was at a loss for a response, in fact, they barely paused before answering my question. The examples just bubbled forth without hesitation. The church fights I heard about were between Deacons, among Trustees, within the congregation, between the church and the town...the examples were far-reaching, surprising, and some were real doozies.

Here is a sampling of the church disagreements I heard about this week.

One church is currently having a painful disagreement about their Fellowship Room floor. The congregation is divided on whether or not to STAIN the newly-sanded floor. Some parishioners feel strongly: yes stain the floor, it will look finished and attractive. Some parishioners say absolutely not: if stained the floor won’t match the walls. Apparently this is not just a spirited disagreement, this is a real fight.

Another church blames their current church disagreement on ME. Here’s why: earlier this year at a clergy gathering I told a story about our church that included how sometimes during the Offering I lift the plates and we all raise our hands and bless the Offering. Apparently, a colleague of mine present at the gathering took that idea, went back to his church, and instituted that practice the next Sunday.

The battle raging there now is that half the congregation loves the practice and wants to do it every Sunday, and the other half of the congregation hates the practice and says it makes them “too Pentecostal.” They want it dropped immediately. The pastor does not know what to do.

Another colleague told me this story about a small, rural church he served a few years ago. The church had a congregation of 30. Apparently, the parishioners had an extended and painful argument that almost tore the 30 members apart forever. The cause of the argument? What color to paint the Sanctuary. And (it gets better) the fight came down to a choice between two colors of paint AND the two colors were both SHADES OF WHITE. The congregation had a protracted fight about what to paint the Sanctuary: Cloud White or Eggshell Cream. Two shades of white almost tore a church apart. The congregation finally took a vote between the two shades of white and one was chosen, Praise God, 17 to 13.

Here’s one final story from the many I collected (believe me, I could go on and on). This one is my favorite. A clergy colleague of mine accepted a call to serve a church and discovered when he got there that the congregation’s decision to be an open and affirming church had been made years before in a rushed and slap-dash fashion. The congregation had not taken the time to consider the issue deeply, the process was hurried, a vote was taken quickly. My colleague found a deep well of resentment in the church because of the final decision, and small fights breaking out on occasion because of the sloppy process. The pastor decided to begin the process all over again, slow down and take time to hear one another. He organized listening sessions with an open mic so people could come forward and speak from their hearts about this sensitive issue. The only guideline he put in place was that every speaker could say whatever he/she wanted to say, but each person had to begin and end her/his comment with these words: “May the Holy Spirit speak through us.” Each speaker, each time, said: “May the Holy Spirit speak through us” before and after they spoke. It turns out that this time the whole experience was healing. People heard each other in a new way. When the vote came around this time, the church voted again, a second time, to be open and affirming and they reported feeling much closer to each other, more like one united church family.

Well, what do church fights have to do with Pentecost? A lot I believe. Let’s look again at today’s passage.

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, tells the familiar yet fantastic story of Pentecost in this week’s text from Acts. The term Pentecost derives from *pentecoste*, the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks at the close of the grain

harvest fifty days after Passover. In the early Church Pentecost included the whole period of the fifty days after Easter—over time, Pentecost was designated as one day: the fiftieth day.

The Book of Acts begins with Jesus promising, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). And that promise is soon fulfilled. Unlike the story of the transfiguration where the deep mystery at the heart of God is shown only to a few disciples, Pentecost is the story of a revelation given all at once to a whole multitude of Jews who are Jesus followers. In the Pentecost story, no one is excluded from receiving the Spirit’s gifts and glory.

On Pentecost, Jews from every nation are gathered together. Then, with a mighty wind, the Holy Spirit shakes the foundation where they are gathered. People begin to talk in their many different languages but then the Holy Spirit descends upon them and wonder of wonders, people can hear and understand each other. Those who were foreign and strangers to each other are made into one family. The tongues as of fire rest upon “each” (Acts 2:3) of those present. Every single person is able to hear and understand what is being said.

In the story, which Kathleen and Doug just read, we heard that just about every corner of the Greco-Roman empire is listed in the roll call of places that people traveled from to this gathering (Acts 2:9). On Pentecost every person in this large crowd—gathered from all over the earth—was touched by the Holy Spirit. Peter, Jesus’ beloved disciple, interprets the descent of the Holy Spirit as a sign that God is working God’s promised signs and wonders in gathering and reconstituting Israel as a nation of prophets. The divisions in humankind are being healed, a new family is being born, the lost are being found, a great harvest of souls is happening, a new gathering of believers is creating **the church**. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit makes a church family out of anybody and everybody. Pentecost is considered the birthday of the church.

People have asked me about Pentecost...Pastor, how could our ancient brothers and sisters all be talking in their own native languages one minute and then suddenly they totally understand each other? Could this be true Pastor, people say with their brows furrowed. I am asked the same thing about the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If I don’t want to get into a long theological discussion, I sometimes just quote the wise expression from the Native American tradition, “I don’t know if it really happened, but I know it’s all true.”

I don't know if the Pentecost story in the Book of Acts actually happened but I know it's all true. I know for certain that when the Holy Spirit descends on a group, people can listen with new ears and hear each other in new ways. I know that even today, even in this church we can gather in meetings and talk right past each other, we can sit side by side and not hear each other, we can speak in our own way and totally confuse each other. AND I know, Praise God, when we turn to prayer, when we ask for God's wisdom, when we stop talking and allow the Holy Spirit to descend upon us, our hearts soften, our ears open, and we hear and understand each other in a new way. When we bring the Holy Spirit into the center of our discussion, we exhale, we pause, we listen and we hear each other in a new way. I know what the Bible says happened on Pentecost happens in churches today, in small but significant ways.

When our Deacons gather we sometimes disagree about seemingly small but important matters. We have struggled over how to serve Communion—some people say: the little cups are our tradition, that's what we've always done, the little cups hold our history and they have deep meaning for me; and others say Intinction means I come forward and the pastor says my name and it feels personal and communal at the same time. In those moments of struggle the Deacons are stuck and unable to really hear or understand each other....each of us has only heard what we individually said (this includes me). It is like we are speaking different languages. We are talking past each other. But when in a meeting, we get quiet and I or someone else prays, we settle down, we hear each other, differences diminish, unity emerges. When we let the Holy Spirit descend upon us, we speak the same language. Just like on Pentecost.

I keep thinking about the church in conflict over their too-rushed decision to become an open and affirming church and how the new pastor had everyone speak to the issue by starting with "May the Holy Spirit speak through us." Maybe when THIS church is facing disagreements and struggle over the new carpet in the Dining Room, hymn choices on certain holidays, little cups or Intinction, we should stop and say, "May the Holy Spirit speak through us" and then continue.

Maybe if the little church with 30 people nearly torn apart deciding which shade of white to paint their sanctuary had stopped their argument and said that before each comment about the merits of Cloud White verses Eggshell Cream each speaker had to say, "May the Holy Spirit speak through us," that fight would have been resolved without so much pain. Maybe that fight would never have happened.

This past week as I collected stories of church fights I heard about painful disagreements including one about repairing a broken septic system, one about how much of the church's endowment to spend annually, one about the salary increase for the pastor, one about which new hymnal to order for the church, and the stories go on and on. The church fights start to sound similar and they certainly sound familiar. All different kinds of churches seem to be fighting about the same things. But I know, and I talked to my colleagues about this, that when the pastor or a lay leader interrupts the disagreement, invokes the Holy Spirit and offers a prayer, the energy shifts, people listen and good people of faith actually hear and understand one another. Suddenly people ARE talking the same language.

Talking to my colleagues about these church disagreements and thinking about the presence of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost led me to dig out the United Church of Christ's seven beliefs that shape our theology. I wanted to remember what the UCC says about church unity and the presence of the Holy Spirit. I decided to review the seven phrases from scripture and tradition that express our commitments as people of faith. Listen:

That they may all be one...this points toward the UCC's efforts to heal the divisions in the body of Christ. We are a uniting church as well as a united church.

The unity of the church is not of its own making...this recognizes that church unity is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

Testimonies of faith, not tests of faith...this conveys the belief that faith can be expressed in many different ways and we honor that.

There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God's holy word...this recognizes that the Bible, although written in specific historical times and places, still speaks to us in our present condition. This is our belief in progressive revelation.

The Priesthood of All Believers...this means that we are called to minister to others and participate as equals in the work and worship of God.

Responsible Freedom...this means that as individuals we are free to believe our own perception of God's will for our lives but we are called to live in relationship with one another guided by the work of the Holy Spirit and the words of Scripture.

And last: **In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity**...this means that the unity that we seek does not require an uncritical acceptance of any point of view, or rigid adherence to doctrine. But it does require mutual understanding and agreement as to which aspects of the Christian faith and life are most important and essential.

It is this seventh tenet of our faith that speaks to me especially powerfully on this Pentecost Sunday. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity (sometimes people say; in all things love). That I believe is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we let the Holy Spirit descend, when we welcome the Spirit into our lives, into our hearts, into our meetings, into our work, we can discern what is essential and where and how we must strive for unity...and we can sense what is non-essential. Then we can let go a little, loosen our grip a little, and stop wanting to have our truth, our choice, our way prevail.

On Pentecost, a disparate group of Jesus followers—an unruly, wild-eyed, mish-mash of strangers—gathered together unable to understand each other. They were disconnected and disengaged with one another. And then the Holy Spirit descended and this motley crew could hear and understand each other and the church was born.

That was long ago. I don't know if it really happened but I know it's all true because I see it happening today. Good, loving, loyal people of faith disagree about things. But if we pause and say, "May the Holy Spirit speak through us," the Holy Spirit will descend and the Holy Spirit will speak through us.

We hear each other in a new way when God is part of the conversation.
We connect with each other in a deeper way when God is part of the conversation.
We listen in a more loving way when God is part of the conversation.

We can solve the inevitable disputes that crop up at church—and at home and at work and in our community groups—when we pause and let the Holy Spirit speak through us.

That is the gift and the blessing of Pentecost.

And let the people say Amen.