

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Being Made One

Romans 8:22-27

May 23

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We're not there yet, but we're getting closer. That is something to celebrate.

Let it be said, on the day of Pentecost, many of them were together in the Sanctuary for the first time in a long time and many others, while not together in person, were still able to take part and eagerly await their own reunion.

On the day of Pentecost, they were all together in one place. That's not a description we take for granted anymore. A diverse group of people from different households on a day of celebration all together in one place. We're still inching back toward that state of things when a group of us can all be together in one place.

Christians have always had a tenuous relationship with being together in one place. Throughout much of history and much of the world today, Christians huddle in small groups; they keep a little quiet; they come and go with one eye watching to see who's watching them. I heard about that years ago when I was in Romania after the fall of communism. Under the dictator Ceausescu, Christians meeting for worship were in danger of being reported to the Securitate. When they were, some were arrested, and they simply disappeared.

They aren't the only ones to suffer for their faith.

In El Salvador, Oscar Romero faced the altar with his back turned to center aisle of a hospital chapel as he lifted the Eucharist above his head. Romero preached relentlessly on behalf of the poor, calling out the duplicity and corruption of the government and the church powers. They decided to silence him. A gun shot rang through the open doors down the center aisle and into his body. He was killed celebrating the Eucharist, the blood of the priest mingled with the blood of Christ.

In China, Christians meet in house churches. In the Cappadocia region of Turkey, Christians lived and worshipped underground in caves they hollowed out and transformed into magnificent sanctuaries you can visit today.

Persecution is not the only thing that has kept Christians from meeting together in one place. Sometimes they divide into smaller and smaller groups of people.

You know the old straw about the Baptist stranded on a desert island. After many years he was rescued by a passing ship. As he stands on the deck of the rescuing vessel, the captain says to

him, "I thought you were stranded alone. How come I can see three huts on the beach?" "Well," replies the castaway, "that one there is my house and that one there is where I go to church." "And the third one?" asks the skipper. "Oh, that's my old church."

According to my extensive research, apparently every denomination has a version of the same joke. I guess every denomination has their version of that same story.

The book of Hebrews worries about a different kind of problem of Christians being together in one place. Not just a problem of persecution or of disagreement or of pandemic, but of people who, one by one, drift away from their faith and from the community of faith. Discouragement, unanswered prayers, personal struggles that don't resolve. People drift. "Don't give up meeting together," Hebrews says. Like holding onto that hand-hold of life, lest you fall down the cliff. Don't give up meeting with one another.

I'm afraid that instruction has been misused by more than a few church leaders in this pandemic season as judgment on those who have been cautious about Covid for themselves and love for others. It was used as justification for callously ignoring common sense protocols for gathering in person. I'm sorry that that has happened, and I'm sorry some of you or people you love were on the business end of that club. It was a misuse of that verse to use it as a weapon in a culture war. I mean, read the verse just before it: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Heb 10.24-25)

Love one another.
Encourage one another.
Hold hope for the Day of the Lord.
That's what church meetings are for.
Love one another.
Encourage one another.
Hold hope for the Day of the Lord.
If they're not for that, what are they for anymore?

The issue in Hebrews was that we need one another for those purposes. When we drift away from relationship with one another, we tend to drift away from God. I know some people say they want God but not church; they want spirituality and not religion or faith. That their church experience was more wounding than healing. Wasn't it Ghandi who said, "I like your Jesus, I don't like you're Christians"? I get it. I really do. Maybe that works for a while. Maybe it works a long time for some people. Who am I to say? What I can say is that over and over in the Scripture and in the experience of countless people, we need one another for love, encouragement, and to hold on to hope. Something vital is lost when we lose one another.

Especially today. We face so very many things that pull us in different directions.

The New Testament puts a lot of value on being with other Christians. A lot of value. It's as if there's no such thing in Biblical faith of individual Christianity. Well, no--there is no such thing in Biblical faith as individual Christianity. That's an important word for us to hear and to take to heart when we live at a time so zeroed in on the individual: individual freedoms, individual expression, individual spirituality.

But that's not the Way. The Way is always personal faith lived and lived out in a community of people. Sometimes that is great joy. Think of Jesus' prayer, "I thank you, Father, that you have made them one as we are one." The Church as the image of the Triune God.

Sometimes, it's harder. Think of most of 1 Corinthians. Whew, those people had some problems. If someone says they want to be a New Testament church, ask them which part of the New Testament. A 1 Corinthians church is a mess, but at least it's a mess where there's hope. They may be arriving early to eat more than their share of the common meal, but at least they're at the Table and can learn from the Table how to be in relationship with one another. God seems to take great hope for our redemption in that for us. Sometimes just showing up gives sufficient room for the Spirit to do its thing in us, and when the Spirit does its thing in a people gathered together, hold on to your hats.

Pentecost was an established spring holiday for Jews, 50 days after Passover, formally called Shavuot, a remembrance of God's gift of the law to Moses on Sinai, and thanksgiving for God's provision through crops and fields. On this Pentecost, people with all kinds of different backgrounds were gathered together listening to Peter and the other apostles teach about Jesus. It was then that the old stories of wind and fire and God's presence on the top of Sinai came down the mountain. No longer was this a remembrance of what one man experienced on a distant mountain, but a whole community gathered in one place. The Living God came near. They'd recited litanies about wind and fire; now they heard the rush of wind; they saw tongues of fire and felt its heat.

And with bewilderment they were swept up in the mystery. They began hearing testimony about God in each of their own language. And they asked, "Are not all these speaking Galileans? How then we each hear in our own language?"

"Are these not these speaking Galileans?" I heard someone recently explain that "Galilean" was 1st century Jewish for "hick." Are these not Galileans? You have to say it with a bit of scorn. Jesus was a Galilean, from Nazareth, the heart of Galilee which prompted Nathaniel's question to Phillip, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Galilee was a punch line for their jokes, like this one etched into on a 2000-year-old ancient stone tablet that archaeologists recently discovered. I'm sure it's legit. It read: "How many 1st century Galileans does it take to screw in a lightbulb?" "Zero, because they don't even have lightbulbs." Oh, that's an oldie but goodie.

Well, the Spirit shows up in and through Galileans, and all kinds of people from all kinds of places that were probably one another's punchlines and maybe punching bags. And the first thing the Spirit does . . . do you catch this . . . the first thing the Spirit does, well besides rush like

wind and flame like fire. . . the first thing the Spirit does is empower people to speak and listen to one another in the language of their hearts--their own language. This is no small thing. This is the first work of the Holy Spirit of God on Pentecost. But this miracle isn't about speech as much as it is about listening. The miracle of Pentecost wasn't in the tongue; it was in the ears. Each was enabled to hear the other. We are enabled to listen. The first work of the Holy Spirit of God is to bring diverse people together, not just in a physical sense but also in a deep, personal sense. Like each person is invited to bring their whole selves to the group. They are made one. Like we sing, *In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, in the name of the Spirit, we are made one.*

This is a mystery. If you ever experience this, this is a mystery that is beyond you. This is beyond us. This is beyond our work, beyond our hopes and admirations. This is the Holy Spirit, working in and through us. Never to be taken for granted. It is the Lord's ongoing work of grace in and through us. Thanks be to God.

Those people were energized by what was happening all around them and in them. The air was supercharged with electricity that flowed in and through them to one another and then into the city and from there to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They became Church that day. Church was born with wind and fire and language and unexpected community and a mission to be light to all the world.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness and what greater weakness do we have than in really listening and speaking to one another such that we hear the Divine voice in the other. God spoke to Moses alone on Sinai. Now, God speaks in and through Galileans and Parthians and Elamites and Medes and you and me and one another.

Even in this weakness the Spirit helps us. Helps us to listen to one another beyond and behind the words. Enables us in prayer to both speak when we don't know how to pray and to quiet our hearts and listen for God's very often still small voice.

The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. In those sighs or those groans, our sighs and groans come to the heart of God. We trust in the Spirit who gives us prayer when there is nothing more that can be said and opens our ears to hear God speaking to us words of love, of encouragement, of truth, of hope.

The Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God and transforms us.
How many Christians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
How many?
Who needs lightbulbs when you're made of flame?

May the Lord Bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.
May God give you grace not to sell yourselves short.
Grace to risk something big for something good.

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth
and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.

Veni sancte spiritus.

Come Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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