

A Family Reunion
Acts 2:1-6, Galatians 4: 1-7
June 4, 2017
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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One of the things I have enjoyed a great deal about the art exhibit that has been in the Tower Gallery for the last few months is that when I want to stroll through the collection and give it some thought, I can start with those little description cards next to each piece or collection. They tell me a little bit about what Gabriella was thinking and serve as a frame of reference for my encounter with her art. So I can see the 11 symmetrical edelweiss blossoms, but the note tells me that the 11th verse of the Seder song is about the 11 brothers of Joseph and the edelweiss shapes are ideal symbols of the 11 stars that the brothers represent in one of Joseph's dreams....

And from there my memory, my experiences kick in and I remember that the edelweiss is a symbol of bravery and dedication and steadfast love. But it also looks like a star and I remember that it was Joseph's dream about his brothers' stars circling him that led to his brothers' hating him — along with that darned coat — and selling him into slavery; and then how that terrible event was transformed by God into the deliverance of those 11 brothers when Joseph rose to power in Egypt and a famine hit the land of the brothers and their father Jacob, who was also called Israel.

And I remember that this is part of a Passover song about how God delivers God's people through things that we can't predict or intend or even understand. And that reminds me that Jesus, the adopted son of a carpenter, was the messiah who changed the world — delivered the world from slavery to sin and death — with a message of love and grace, a message so powerful that even a martyr's cross could not rob it of its power. Whew, that's a lot to be triggered by a drawing and a little piece of paper.

But let's be honest. Wouldn't it be nice if situations, if crises and if people came with those signs; if you could look at this person and see a sign that said: "Just had a fight with my spouse, proceed at your own risk." Or if that lady at the DMV had a sign over her head that said: "Had all my coffee this morning, so I'm in a great mood, pick my line." Or if last night's car and knife attacks came with a little sign explaining that these men don't represent the mainstream of any religion, but were set off by this particular event, or motivated by that particular twisted interpretation of the Koran.

A few years back, the Cleveland Clinic won a ton of awards with a commercial they ran. It started as an almost five-minute training video for employees that went so well, they shortened it for TV. The video imagines what it would be like to walk through a hospital like the huge Cleveland Clinic and be able to instantly know the hearts and minds of everyone you encounter there. It begins at the hospital entrance and moves slowly through the whole hospital and, as you encounter staff and patients and family, you learn what they are going through.

An older gentleman coming in the door is afraid he's waited too long for the test; a young man using a walker worries how he will pay for all of this. In one scene on an escalator, there are two men riding up as the camera is riding down and they both have strange expressions on their faces. A little caption comes up over each of their heads. "The tumor was benign" one of them says. "The tumor was malignant" says the other. All throughout the video we see people in waiting rooms, some who have good news, some bad. The purpose of the video is to promote empathy, to promote thoughtfulness.

It actually begins with a quote from Henry David Thoreau: "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each others' eyes for an instant?" It is a question about empathy, a more elegant way of asking if we've ever considered what it's like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

Why is it that the Cleveland Clinic and Thoreau are promoting empathy as a path to being more fully part of the human family? For some reason that came to mind when I practically tripped over these two awkwardly combined texts for today. The Narrative Lectionary ends today. We will be doing sermon series for the summer before we start the story over again back in Genesis in September. And here on Pentecost, they give us the start of the traditional Pentecost passage — the most preached-on Sunday text of my preaching career — but they pair it with the end of our three-week visit with Paul and the good, but confused, people of Galatia. Some have called this Paul's adoption narrative.

At first glance it's an awkward mash-up isn't it? The Birth of the Church and the coming of the Spirit, with Paul's recounting the entire history of God's journey with God's people in one metaphor — heirship.

For Paul, before Christ, it was as though the children of Abraham and Sarah were just that, children, who needed a guardian. And God provided that guardian for God's people, the law. But then, in Christ, for those who follow him, it was like his transforming grace aged us into our majority and there is no longer the need for a guardian. We no longer look to a guardian to make our decisions for us. We have the Spirit to guide us, but not control us. It means we are all heirs, all part of one family. It means we didn't do anything to get God's love and grace but inherit it from Christ.

Still, it begs the question, if Christ made us one family and we are no longer children but heirs, then why do we need a Spirit to move among us?

Have you ever been part of a large family, a family that does reunions and get-togethers and that sort of thing? Well, for better or worse, at varying times over the last 53 years, I've been a part of three of those families — my mother's mother's family, my mother's father's family and my father's father's family. — the Neelies, the Beckhams and the Kirbys.

We are all part of these families but we only get together when someone agrees to be the host, the one who makes it happen — the reunion coordinator if you will. And that's what I want to suggest is the Spirit's role in Paul's metaphor of our large adopted Spirit-filled family.

We may all be one family but we are only going to recognize that when someone is pulling us together, being the one to craft the save-the-date cards and the reminders — sort of like those descriptions next to the art out there that reminds us of the stories and experiences and the Lord we share in common, drawing us together in compassion and with vulnerability to share those stories and experiences and to make a new story as we grow together. It's the one who draws the family together and does so by using our understandings of ourselves and family to inspire us to grow, to claim and celebrate and explore our common identity, to recognize gifts and abilities and passions we all bring into this family enterprise. The Spirit makes the family reunion — that is the church — happen.

And that fits with the Acts story, doesn't it? It was clear the people needed something when Jesus was no longer with them. After regaining him on Easter, there was great concern that in losing him again after the ascension everything might fall apart. And then on that day, when everyone was gathered into Jerusalem for the Temple celebration of Pentecost — the 50th day from Passover — when there was such a great risk that the fragile group of Jesus' followers might collapse like so many of the hero cults or Hebrew sects that had collapsed before, something happened; something happened that began with — of all things — understanding.

Whatever it was that moved through the people, they began to speak in ways that allowed strangers to understand one another, that broke down earthly barriers of nationality and race and created a space where people could share their faith in such a way that strangers could understand them. It's as though those tongues of fire illumined every face so that, at least for a moment, it was like that video I was talking about. People could see and hear and understand one another, be freed to share what was on their hearts and moving in their lives of faith and discipleship. Perhaps in ways they never could before. All of this, through the coming of the Spirit, was its own kind of family reunion, where all could experience one another as true brothers and sisters, as true heirs of the same God, using Paul's language.

And here's the interesting part, the Spirit didn't change the hearers. She changed the speakers. She opened their mouths so those who needed to hear a word of welcome, a word of grace, a word of hope, could understand in the language they arrived with. People didn't need to become someone else to become heirs; they simply needed to hear the Spirit speaking through others in a way they could understand. And a family was born, the church was born. The full acceptance of the mutual adoption of all for whom Jesus died and was raised is set in motion.

You hear a lot of hand wringing these days that the Spirit has abandoned the church, that too often we Christians no longer speak in a language that others understand, that the Spirit's words of adoption and grace get lost in our churchy words and churchy doctrines, that church is boring or irrelevant or worse, hostile to people and their families.

It's a time when religious leaders make the news — not for actions and words that celebrate Jesus' gracing resurrection or his life and ministry of radical hospitality — but for ignorant or xenophobic or homophobic comments. But Paul reminds us that in the fullness of time, when we are ready and surrender ourselves to God's presence within us more

fully, God does not change others but gives us the gifts we need to speak simple, honest words of love and grace and welcome. The Spirit removes the barriers when the people need to understand. The Spirit builds community through empathy and understanding. The spirit illuminates the gifts that each person gathered has so that, when our actions and our words speak — not at, but with one another — there is life and fire and hope in the new understandings that grow in the warmth of the Spirit's flame.

So what does it mean for us? Perhaps it means that within this room the Spirit has already gifted us with what we as a community need to communicate — that ever-new message to others with our words — how we speak to others in a way that demonstrates we love them as God does. And perhaps it means we've been gifted in ways so that we can communicate that in our actions, too, how we stand up for the oppressed, or stand with the rejected, or comfort the afflicted, demonstrating a love that seeks community, that seeks understanding in how we live our faith with our time and our money.

Each day is a new Pentecost for Christ's church, for each day the Spirit would give us the words, the actions, the choices we need to communicate love. Our challenge is to not be afraid, to see our heir-ship in the Kingdom as a source of confidence and hope that, though we may not be articulate or capable of doing huge, big things, someone needs to hear the word of hope we can offer, the word of love we can show. And in that, the Spirit will make of us one family, now and forever, a reunion that has no end. Thanks be to God.