

There's a New Day Coming: the Power That Makes Us One

The Day Of Pentecost

Upon my graduation from Harvard Divinity School in 1985, I had the opportunity to put into practice the inclusive theology I had learned there. I was invited to Cuba to be part of a summer delegation of young African American church musicians, organized by the Black Theological Research Project to share our cultural heritage and stories of liberation with other economically oppressed peoples in the Caribbean and Central America. One evening following a long, hot day of work in the fields, our group met beneath a tree located on the campsite where we stayed for the first week of our journey. We gathered beneath the tree with others from Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Chile, and El Salvador for a time of worship, theological reflection and community-based teaching on liberation theology. At the end of worship, our African American delegation was asked to sing. The passion and power of song that we learned from our parents and elders in African American churches not only flowed through us but touched the curiosity and spirit of others whose language we couldn't speak and whose political ideas we were learning better to appreciate and understand.

One woman from Central America approached to ask something in Spanish. I couldn't understand her, so I began speaking in German with a young man from Nicaragua who also knew German. He translated her words to me in German, I responded in German, and he responded back to her in Spanish. Just about that time one of our delegation members from Chicago, who only spoke English and a little Ebonics, joined in

Lectionary Loop

Pentecost, Years A, B, and C,
Acts 2:1-21

Teaching Tips

Many Languages, One Voice

As you teach this lesson, have all the members of the class speak all at the same time, testifying to one another in one loud voice about God's goodness. Select a praise song at the opening of the lesson, something with a few easy words (e.g. "God's Been So Good," "Thank You Lord"). As you sing it several times, invite members who might be able to translate the song in another language (e.g., Spanish, Chinese) to translate and sing it to the rest of the group in the language they've selected. Have them reflect upon how this kind of sharing symbolizes that different cultures can be celebrated while the people of God can be one.

the conversation. I translated her words into German for my Nicaraguan friend, who translated them into Spanish for the Central American woman, and just then I realized the power that we had between the four of us to be one inclusive and diverse people. Though our languages were different and perhaps confusing to hear, the Spirit and power of worship and song initiated our interest to find languages in which we could share our hope for a day of liberation where we all would be equal, free and made one. It is that kind of day for which many of us in our faith communities have prayed, a day like the first Pentecost, described in perhaps one of the greatest texts of inclusion and diversity: Acts 2:1-21.

The Day of Pentecost: a Response to the Tower Of Babel

We initiated this discussion on diversity and inclusion by identifying the risk, challenge and sacrifice involved in creating inclusive and diverse communities of faith. In Session 1, the source of this challenge was described as our inability to get along, primarily due to the different cultural norms, languages, ideas, images, and perceptions that make it next to impossible to talk with each other, let alone build inclusive communities in a diverse global world. As in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), our languages have been confounded, and we have been confused in our efforts to make everyone the same. Like the people who built the Tower of Babel, we are not recognizing the misuse of power and the perpetuation of hierarchy in the structures we've created in our corporate, social and religious institutions. In sessions 2-7, we not only examined the biblical ideas and theological beliefs that work to exclude cultural, racial, gendered, disabled, sexual, and generational groups, but we also examined—particularly in the “progression” theology in Luke-Acts—how the biblical witness calls us to greater diversity and more inclusive visions.

For those who would put an end to their work on the Tower of Babel (“let us make a name for ourselves” Gen 11:4), the Day of Pentecost comes as an affirmation. The texts from Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21

Sources

See “The Spirit of Prophecy Falls Upon the Community,” *NIB* vol. 10, pp. 52-58. The map on p. 56 shows all the places from which the people had come.

are connected by this one thought: though our languages and cultures have been confounded and confused, the power and anointing of God's Spirit will make us one. In Acts 2, the progressive history of the Luke-Acts tradition, which widens and makes more inclusive the Body of Christ, begins anew.

The Day of Pentecost occurred during the Festival of Weeks, at a celebration in the public square outside the Jerusalem temple. Visitors from many places in the world suddenly were filled with power and passion to speak to one another in many different languages (vv. 1-2), not just to be heard, but to hear and understand other stories of faith from other cultures. Galileans, Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, joined residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Israel, Crete, and the Middle East to listen to one another speak about the goodness of God. What a great day it was and what a great day it will be for those of us who embrace the power and passion to do the same.

Concluding Thought: It Takes Power and Passion to Become One

One of my mother's old gospel songs says: "Lord, I've never reached perfection, but I'm trying!" And with many years of conversation on diversity and inclusion, I sometimes respond, "I wish we'd hurry up and get there!" However, it takes more than Bible studies, intercultural conventions, and dialogue groups to build diverse communities of faith. In addition to these things, it takes inward strength, passion, and power to help us appreciate every little step we make along the way. One of the most important insights that the Day of Pentecost gives to each of us seeking to do the honest and just work of diversity and inclusion is our need to stay committed and dedicated to this work and vision. The apostles received power when the Holy Spirit came (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit provided the power and passion to inspire and propel them toward building an inclusive world, particularly when faced with questions about the religious law (5:17-42), persecution and capital punishment from the government (6:8-7:60), and internal conflict in the church (Rom

Sources

See David Farmer, "The Unselfish Prayer" in *The Pastor's Bible Study* (v.1), especially Session V, pp. 181-183, for discussion of pastoral self care.

Reflections

Power, Passion, and Commitment

1. What's your understanding of the Holy Spirit?
2. How do you understand the many languages and testimonies that were spoken on the Day of Pentecost?
3. Do you think it is possible to have so many different cultural testimonies about God and not be divided?
4. How is commitment to make diversity connected to power? What makes commitment to diversity and inclusion decline?
5. What causes clergy and people working on diversity to burn out?
6. What kind of power from God and passion from the Spirit of Christ will help you stay involved?