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Melting Idols

Acts 2 | Genesis 11

For many churches like ours, the day of Pentecost is an occasion to celebrate diversity in our midst. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability.” Luke the storyteller says that everyone was amazed and astonished that all spoke in different tongues and yet understood one another. It’s a powerful image of an inclusive community that accepts the differences and meets the needs that each one of us brings. It is an ideal scene of personal expression and individualized attention. Just imagine if an elementary school classroom could operate in this way. Each child empowered to speak in the authenticity of their own voice; teacher speaking a language that every child can understand. This is a portrait of equity and diversity in community that we all dream of.

The Pentecost scene is a narrative introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, a book of the New Testament that tells the story of how the Gospel spread throughout the Mediterranean in the years after Jesus walked the earth. Luke’s intent is to show how the Holy Spirit carries the good news to all people regardless of their identity, tradition, or social location. This is the book that identifies women as carriers of the Gospel in greater numbers than any other New Testament source. This is the book of the Ethiopian eunuch, which challenges our assumptions about sexuality and race. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit of God breaks into prison. God’s presence crosses a stormy sea. Mary Elizabeth and I have talked in recent weeks about how Peter and Paul take their message about the love of Jesus to different audiences throughout the region, to both the most orthodox Jews and to the most heathen Greeks. Do you see what’s happening here? Everyone in this story has different needs, gifts, and capacities. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher who teaches in the way that each student needs to learn. This good news is coming to you. But do not worry. It’s going to come in a way that you can hear and understand. The means will enable you to participate. The language will honor how you communicate. We have all had the experience of being spoken to in a way that we cannot accept. But the grace of God will come in the way that we need to receive it.

All of this is in contrast to the earlier story of Babel, the text in the book of Genesis that inspires the Pentecost. The myth teaches that way back in the beginning of time, before the whole earth had been populated, there was one big extended family that all spoke the same language. They had so much success working together that they agreed to build a city around a great tall tower, a tower that would reach into the heavens. The story suggests that they are doing these things for all the wrong reasons. "Come, let us build ourselves a city; and a tower with its top in the heavens that we may make a name for ourselves." Notice the repetition. This is Chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis. God has literally just finished creating the heavens and the earth. Hardly a generation ago, God had shaped the first humans from the soil of the earth. And now these people who have nothing they have not received directly from the hand of God are going to build a city and a tower? Where is their gratitude? If they were to proceed with this tower, they would come to worship their own abilities and achievements more than God who has provided all that they have. God's disruption of their plan by garbling their speech so that they cannot understand each other to execute their plans shows God's power over the idols that we make.

An idol can be any object of worship that disorders our worship of the true God. In America today there is no more popular and pervasive idol than our guns. I'm not really a gun person, so I have a hard time understanding why we are so impervious to policy changes that would stop preventable gun violence. But I have a few hunches. One thing I know from experience is that there is a physical experience to shooting guns. I once visited a shooting range in Florida, where we were taught how to use common handguns and assault rifles. I can still remember the adrenaline rush of firing such powerful weapons. Even in a highly structured and carefully supervised environment, I experienced a strong physical and emotional reaction to handling these weapons. It was thrilling. It was fun. There aren't many things in my life that have made me feel the way I felt when shooting really powerful guns. That feeling is part of what makes me so suspicious of guns, and I can see why some may feel protective of that experience, and that sensation.

Of course another element at play are the myths we tell ourselves about what creates safety and security. When we hear it said that guns are necessary for self-defense, or that the answer to protecting our schools and hospitals is to arm our teachers and other personnel, or that the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun - then we are recreating

the ungrateful and unfaithful sins of Babel. The problem at Babel was that the people were convinced that they could do it by themselves and for themselves. God's disruption of that scheme reorients us to remember what God has given us. Guns are the physical symbols of our fixations with security and control. When we say that they are idolized, of course we do not mean that Americans literally worship them. What we mean is that the power we give them distracts us from what God has provided and causes us to neglect worship of God. When I think about the idolatry of guns in our country, I'm haunted by a scene in the book of Numbers. The People of God are being terrorized by venomous serpents. God gives instructions to Moses to make an idol of the serpents in bronze. The people who are bitten by the snakes gaze into the bronzed idol. The very thing that causes their affliction is also their remedy. What a terrifying cycle of pain and suffering that we continue insisting that the guns that cause our violence are also the remedy for it. Can't you hear God thundering at the Israelites that it is nonsense to worship these idols!

Meanwhile our political system has no solutions in sight. Even the politicians who agree gun reform is necessary and wise are unable to move toward legislative action because of political threats from extremists in their own party. Here we see another parallel with the story of Babel. Our priorities are so disordered and so far from our responsibility to the will of God that it is as if our speech is garbled to prevent communication and collaboration. The dysfunction we experience is the consequence and the cost of worshiping the wrong things.

On the day of Pentecost, we remember the power of the Holy Spirit. As in Luke's telling of the Pentecost story, it will blow new life into our community. It has the heat to speak in truth and in clarity. It has the strength to put everything back in order. When we are focused on all the wrong things, it is in God's power to disrupt us and to break us apart, to scatter us helter skelter all around. And it's also in God's power to bring us together, to bind us in faith, to convey God's love in the ways we need to hear. So let us worship God, the One God, and put no other gods before them.