

INHERIT THE EARTH  
THE WORD IS VERY NEAR

Texts on Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 2013

*Deuteronomy 30 (selections); Acts 2: 1-21*

Since Easter, we have worked with the great challenge of our times, the news that climate change will bring no more normal now—that everything will change, and we must change. Our species has no experience with demands so implacable. Our whole world view—religious, philosophical and political—along with all other world views, evolved on a hospitable planet and presumes such. But that simple presumption of earth’s hospitality has been shattered by our own actions, however unwittingly. Therefore, our religion faces a test unlike any previous: Is our faith able to help us adapt and adopt a world view and habits adequate to a world waiting to be born? Why, just yesterday, Columbia Univ. professor James Hanson, retired head of NASA’s Goddard Institute, was speaking to lawmakers in London. He told them that if the tar sands in Canada and other lands are exploited “to a significant extent,” then the problem of climate change will be “unsolvable.” Yet like an alcoholic, the nations belly up to the barrel and tell the baron of oil, “Break open another!” If in this crisis, our religion is not part of the solution, then what we do each Sunday is part of the addiction.

Certainly, religious life has been key in crises before. We could tell the stories for hours, but let Moses speak for them all. “I call hot heaven and a warming earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” But before the faithful get to work on themselves and their situation, the people must first confront the basic predicament of society. We just don’t agree. Unlike the animals, we come to our crises with separate consciences and separate aims, which cannot be coerced; with separate fears and separate gifts for living with our fears.

It is a near certainty that some hearing the claims of this sermon this morning are registering annoyance, disagreement, or total shut down. How do I know? Yale professor Anthony Leiserowitz has studied how Americans respond to claims of climate change and finds six Americas out there: the alarmed, the concerned, and the cautious; the disengaged, the doubtful, and the dismissive. About one-fifth of us feel alarmed about climate change, and about one fifth don’t believe there is any crisis at all. The rest are concerned or cautious. We just don’t agree. And when we don’t agree, it seems we can’t act. But precisely here, like a surgeon’s scalpel prepared for a healing cut, Christian faith can come to bear.

The Pentecost story is all about very different people coming to understand one thing in the same way all together at the same time. Is the story literally true? Is it a parable? I don't know. But I do know that fighting over that question would be ridiculous. Here is a story of God Holy Spirit bringing unity of mind thrillingly alive—the very condition we so lack—and someone wants to disagree over details? We must not miss God's word in the story, that unity is possible, for we trust that all things are possible with God.

A very long lecture on the Bible could not exhaust all the ways these scriptures call humanity to unity. Indeed, the whole aim of God's inspiration here is to bring us to unity of mind. Moses brought God's commandments to his people to unify them. Again and again, Moses calls to the heart, not the head, that we might hear and love and together obey, not from terror or guilt, but from our heart. Facing their worst crisis ever, Jeremiah sang for God to the Jews, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts . . . No longer shall they teach one another or say, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest." (Jer 31: 33ff) A few generations later, Isaiah of Babylon tuned his voice to the same theme: "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and *all* flesh shall see it together." All the gospels show Jesus ministering amidst fierce disagreement about who he is, and how God is revealed on earth. Then comes Crucifixion/Resurrection and many see as if with one eye a whole, new meaning to all they had ever heard, and all they had never understood. Unity of mind is all God's concern.

Now comes Pentecost. It is not really the Church's birthday, for the Church does live automatically in its body, as does flesh-and-blood, once born. No, Pentecost is the paradigm for *how* the Church is re-born in every crisis of difference and disagreement. Pentecost is the practice of so bending the ear that you hear the unity of humanity on fire, deeper than the differences. This is the word of God. "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up and get it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the rising seas for us, and get it so that we may hear and obey?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart."

When I came among you over two years ago to help you deal with and heal with your differences, to prepare for a future not like your past, I often said that when the people of an organization behave badly toward one another, they do so because they disagree about the core purpose of their organization. We see it in America as a whole: harsh behavior, and great disagreement about what this nation is for. One hundred fifty years ago, that mission disagreement plunged our people into civil war. In churches, the failure to see one purpose together leads to splits, sometimes explicit, some-

times silent and slow. Nevertheless, the question always hovers over the body like a dove: Though the word is very near, can you hear it? Will you listen? Can you feel the unity in your humanity deeper than your differences—a union in communion which can soothe your bitterness and sheathe the sharp sword of your tongue? That's the Pentecost question. Can you feel the gospel calling you out of your small self, out of your tired old beliefs, out of your feelings and failings and fears, unconcerned to save your self as you once were, ready to become one as never before?

This word is very near. It is in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. Pentecost is for this, that all flesh hear God's word together. Therefore, our ability to adapt to the demands of climate change does not depend first of all on intellectual agreement about the facts. No, the possibility that we will be able to adapt in time to the demands of a new civilization depends first of all on our relationships with one another—on our "communitability."

Here, then, is the crisis up close, for churches, generally speaking, are not good at creating community. In the 1990s, M. Scott Peck's *Foundation for Community Encouragement* helped a variety of organizations to strengthen their community-ability. They discovered that, compared with businesses, churches were not much interested in community. Peck surmised that

[C]ommunity requires a good deal of time and work [but] most churchgoers simply do not have the time to "do" community at church. Nor do they want to do the often painful, emotionally stretching work which community requires. They want the worship service to be pleasantly uplifting and . . . are willing to put up with [the social hour] in order to keep everything nice . . . [D]espite protests to the contrary, they have no desire to see the boat rocked . . . But business is another matter. Church is not the place where people's lives are on the line, but their workplace is. Here, decisions count. Here, therefore, people may be willing to spend the time and effort to ensure that the decisions are the right ones. It is in business that they may be willing to pay the price of community . . . So I have a prophecy to make. If Utopia is to emerge, it will do so primarily from the world of business . . . Still, there is nothing like a crisis to create the right sort of political climate [to introduce community]. (*A World Waiting to Be Born*, p. 352 ff)

Riverside, our crises have arrived. There is the seemingly external crisis of climate change, which many deny; and the crisis internal to the church, namely, to hear together one word why Riverside must exist for a whole world; one word, deeper than all our differences. This word is very near. How will you hear it?

The Bible constitutes a single response to this question. The stories say that in order to hear God's word, you must place yourselves in the space for grace to come. You must open yourselves to winds of the Holy Spirit. You cannot go on with business as usual. Since we church-goers mostly will not come together to do hard work, the worship service itself must become the

laboratory for God's experiment with us. We need to grapple with the terrible risks we are running when we script the whole service, from one end to the other. That is the exact opposite of the Pentecost paradigm. There nobody had a script, and a thousand tongues broke forth and every one was true and three thousand were baptized and joined the church that day. Oh! how we would have to change our scripts if Holy Spirit came down on our people as on them She did that day.

We need to try out a hard question and a fierce confession. Is it possible that our formal ways and full scripts, our vaunted notion that we are a cathedral to the nation whose patterns and traditions are as solid as the stone we worship within—is it possible that by scripting the freedom of God's Spirit right out of our service, except insofar as the preacher performs it, we are hanging on to hierarchy and control, to centralization and power, to wealth and fear and fossil fuels and dead democracy and social injustices we can't budge and crime and ghetto and prison and poverty and . . . Are you with me?

Here is what I hear in God's word through all scriptures and all times. God is not in time, as we are, yet God yearns for our presence in God's presence. Therefore, those who desire to know God's will on earth will take up the discipline of disciples, the discipline of letting go at the right time, in order that Holy Spirit might show up in God's time, in God's own people, unexpected, unscripted, untethered by death, alive. Let Pentecost pour down here every Lord's Day in some new, unscripted way, and we will discover God's will for us, deeper than all difference. For the Word is very near now. It is in your mouth. It is in your heart that you may observe it.

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