

Sermon

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A Pentecost Reflection: Radical Unity

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Good morning! So, I am Rob Stewart. I'm the Executive Director of New Horizons, and I'm really, really grateful to be here.

I don't get out and do this much. I used to be a pastor, years and years ago. Not anymore. Now I work with youth and young adults. So, if you're unaware, New Horizons is an organization that serves youth and young adults that are experiencing homelessness here in Seattle and in King County. And y'all are such good partners to us (even if you don't know, you are) You've done a ton for us: drives – you've delivered more towels to us than we've gotten in probably the last seven years. So, that was an amazing gift – and, you partner with us in a lot of ways. So it feels good to be here, to be doing this with you.

I have a confession that I have, you know, right around four hours of sleep. I have a newborn, and she is objectively the cutest newborn on the planet. So that helps. And she's way better than her sister, who was a nightmare when she was little. So she's good, and that also helps... but, it's good to be with you, and good to be able to share.

When I read the passages for today, my immediate reaction was, "Oh, gosh, I don't like those. I just don't like those." I have to confess that I'm not from a liturgical tradition and when I heard that it was *Pentecost*, I had lots of baggage from my sort of pseudo-charismatic upbringing, and I had lots of thoughts. And then I read Tower of Babel and I thought, "Gosh, I really don't like *that* story either in a lot of ways," – so I'm excited to be able to *talk* about them with you and sort of share a little bit of how I worked through some of that.

Just so you know, I grew up in a western Protestant tradition. And a lot of my life, we just ignored the Old Testament in general; we just sort of ignored it. We told stories from it, it made lots of great material for, like, flannel-graphs, and Sunday School. And so we didn't *totally* ignore it, but we didn't *deal with it* or interact with it much, it just felt distant, in and of itself, and the version of God in the Old Testament was *entirely* distant.

That was like a much more "macro-level" God in many ways; was making the world, was inflooding the world, was building nations, and languages, and putting leaders in place, and then taking leaders out of place... It just felt like much more "macro-level" stuff. And that was really distant, especially in contrast to my Western Protestant understanding of God in the New Testament, who was just so *personal*: so concerned

with the person and the individual, was healing people *one at a time*, and doing all of these miraculous things. And the work on the cross — that was seen as *personal* — yes, it was for lots of people, but for *me*, and that God wanted to live in *my* heart and guide *my* steps, and worried about *my* individual holiness; that God. I was hopeful that someday I would be evacuated and be with Him in heaven forever. And I was told over and over again, “You know, if you were the *only one*, God would have come down himself in the form of Jesus and died *just for you*. Even if you were the only one!” — which is terrible theology; doesn’t make a lot of sense. But it’s what we know — it’s personal, that God is personal.

And so, we had with these two sort of contrasting views, we had this macro-level pseudo-distant God that was really oriented to, like, national interests. And then over here, you had this very personal God who is interested in *me*.

It was hard to put these two things together. It’s not that we thought they were two gods. They just kind of didn’t seem like the same version of the same God. It’s hard to mix it. It’s hard to make a cohesive understanding of God and so eventually, we just stopped trying. We just said “We’re gonna focus on the New Testament. We’re gonna put most of our energy there.”

And what happened is we developed a great version of a personally-oriented God that was very, very, very engaged in *me* and *my* spirituality, and in *my* soul and in *my* heart. And we got really good at commodifying that, and selling it like crazy; we did a good job at that.

But we also created a God that was slightly disinterested in the world as a whole. He wasn’t so interested in humanity and the world and what happened to the globe, it was more of like *you* — more *you*.

And so, one of the things I love about the passages that we are reading today and that we read, is that it forces you to attempt to try to marry these two disparate versions of God. It’s forcing you to say “You’ve got to look at both of them at the same time and try to figure out how to put them together.” You’ve got the God in Babel, which is a really, really strange story, and you’ve got the God in Pentecost, which is a really, really strange story. And you’ve got to figure out how to put them together. It’s essentially saying, “You do not understand Pentecost till you understand the story of Babel, you just don’t; you just don’t get it.”

The Tower of Babel — I’m not sure what you make of that story. I don’t know. You may read that and be like, “That is strange.” God looked down and people were building

certain types of special bricks just to build really high buildings to get up to heaven, which is in the sky still, that was sort of a main line of thinking at that point. They're building this tower. They're doing this and God gets a little bit intimidated and a little bit concerned. And so he breaks the tower and scatters them and gives them different languages. It's a weird story. No matter what you make of it, whether you think it is real, or a myth, or it's just some hyperbolic thing, or if it's some historical, cultural narrative that lives in the Biblical story – I don't know what you make of it. And frankly, I don't know if it really matters.

I don't know if it matters, because at the heart of the story is really *a commentary on the problem of humanity*. It is saying, "You know what's wrong with us? We are constantly trying to hoard power." We constantly want to be masters of our own domain. We want to control things; we want to be god of this planet. That's what we really want. We are driven by self-interest. And as we build those things, those things have a tendency to divide us in powerful ways, not just by language, but we put up walls and borders and don't want different people inside of these borders. It is about how we are driven by a *painful self-interest* as people and it is that self-interest which divides us and shatters us as a whole.

I don't know what you make of the story of Pentecost. Growing up in a charismatic environment, we were told, "Listen, it just might happen that you'll get a divided flaming tongue here in service today; you might see that. And you better be filled with the Spirit, talking in tongues, or you're not saved." It's a personal story; this is for *you*. You got to get that God and that Spirit inside of you to do this.

I don't know what you make of it. It's a weird story. It's a strange, strange story. I don't know if you think it's real. I don't know if you think it's a myth. I don't know if you think it's a cultural narrative that made it's way to the Bible. I don't know. I'm not sure it matters, actually.

The heart of the Pentecost story is really about *the descending of the Spirit coming to earth and bringing disparate people together and breaking down barriers and borders. Creating radical unity* where there is massive disunity.

It's saying that at the heart of what it means to be human, we are divided by self-interest and gain, and clawing for my own. We have built systems that have divided us; we have done these things – but under the auspice of the Spirit, you are being brought together in *radical unity* and then *you* are called as people who have seen and tasted the spirit to go and to prophesy, to like tell the world that we ought to be

coming together under this one God, laying down our arms to be radically and powerfully unified, to be fully reconciled with each other and with God.

The story of Pentecost is a story about *resetting* all of the painful ways in which we have divided ourselves. It's about this incredible proclamation that when the Spirit resides, there is unity and reconciliation. There is the coming together, in ways that are confounding, and challenging, and without boundary. I mean, that's the story of Pentecost. I mean, you just don't understand the Pentecost till you really understand that where the Spirit is, the Spirit drives and pulls unity, pulls reconciliation together.

And we are called to participate as radical signposts to a world that *does not believe that it can happen*. I mean, you don't have to think very hard to think that we are a people, especially in the US right now, that actually believe that reconciliation really isn't possible. We are divided in profound ways, profound ways. We don't meaningfully believe that reconciliation and radical unity is possible.

But as Christians driven by the Spirit, we are supposed to be the ones prophesying that it is actually still possible! It can still happen! We're supposed to be finding examples of it and celebrating it, and showing it, and demonstrating it. When the people of God gather, we ought to be a place that people look and say, okay, everywhere else, it's not working. But here there is some form of radical unity that is happening. There's a type of laying down of arms and reconciliation that we don't see anywhere else. I mean, this is the work of the Spirit. We're supposed to be living within the context of Pentecost in that way.

A few thoughts: Some people think that because I work in human services, that we are at the cutting edge of race, equity and inclusion. We're not. We're not. It's really hard work. And we're wildly divided. But I've been in this work for 20 years and I've learned some of the things that I think make it at least *more possible* for it to happen.

First one is: you cannot be a person that is driving radical reconciliation, and remain uncommitted to change. I mean, personal change. It's impossible; these things don't work together. You can't say, "Yes, I want to be this wildly inclusive place, as long as people generally assimilate to what it is that I already believe!" Doesn't happen. It works on both sides, conservative and liberal. It does! You can't go into the work of radical unity and radical reconciliation and expect that you're going to be able to stay the same: core beliefs, how you see the world, how you see this group of people, how you understand this political issue... It's a fact: *you must change*.

The second point that I have is that you got to be pursuant of these opportunities. I mean, I'm telling you right now: radical reconciliation and radical unity is not going to come to your door and ask you to sign up for a membership, it is not going to happen. I mean if you were not looking for opportunities to enter into that game and into those conversations and into those relationships to pursue and build those kinds of things, it's just not going to *happen*. You're just not going to be a part of it. It's almost as if our feet are too heavy, in some ways. We're so hard to move, that—just because unity is happening around us doesn't mean that we're taking part in it. We got to get up, gotta move; we've got to be pursuant of these opportunities.

The last thing is this: that you can't wait for the Spirit to guide you to do the good work. I actually think that the good work, and the participation the good work, is what often *begets the Spirit*. I look back at my life and I took a job in human services working with youth in Hollywood, not because I *really* wanted to do something that was oriented to great justice work, it was like I couldn't find a job and my friend ran the place and he was like, "You want a job?" And I'm like, alright, I'll do it.

And you know what was funny: I was in, and *it changed me*. The people changed me. The work changed me. The way in which I saw the world started to change, the way I started to see people who are living in in chronic poverty and chronic homelessness, the diversity of that population. It just started to change how I saw the world, and frankly changed everything that I understood about theology. It just *did*. I started to see and believe different things about what the Spirit is actually possible of doing.

So those are my three really simple points from my hyper-evangelical background. We are called to be radical agents of reconciliation, to *be* the signpost that is pointing towards something different, to restore hope in a world that has lost it, related to radical unity and radical reconciliation, and it's going to cost us something to be those kinds of people.

We're going to have to be committed to fundamentally change. It's just true. We're going to have to pursue those things with an enormous ferocity, or it just won't happen. And we've got to try stuff. Because we believe that in the trying it opens us up to be more changed.

So— that's my Pentecost reflection for today.