

St. John's, Albany
15 May 2016

Day of Pentecost

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17

Affirmation of Baptism for Sade Miller, Delia Quinones, Hailey Wood

The text is from an African proverb: “The daughters of the lions are lions, too.”

What I remember of my Sunday School days were the little spindle-backed blue chairs. They were painted with high-gloss paint in a kind of cornflower blue and they matched the short, square tables that we sat at. It was all very pretty.

What I remember, too, were the cherry-red Lifesavers. Libby Lastrup—Mrs. Lastrup to me, although at home I called her “Libby,” same as my mother did and felt quite proud to be so bold—would put one in front of each of us in my Sunday School class. Then we would each fold our hands and bow our heads and say grace.

“Grace” was a little odd to me. We didn’t say grace at home and this wasn’t exactly a real meal. But the cherry-red Lifesavers always seemed well worth the strangeness of thanking God for them. Looking back, giving thanks to God for those tasty Lifesavers was probably my first exposure to the ritual action of the church.

I always get a chuckle or, if I’m in bad mood, I get *really* annoyed by people who complain about “empty ritual.” There is *certainly* badly-done ritual. There is plenty of boring ritual, both certainly enough to give the word “ritual” a bad name.

But ritual isn’t supposed to be either empty *or* full. Instead it’s supposed to sharpen our senses or fire up our imagination. It’s supposed to point to the event it signifies. Ritual only has meaning because it refers to something beyond itself. I want to say that again, because it’s important: Ritual only has meaning because it refers to something beyond itself. For example, Libby Lastrup knew we wouldn’t get our nutritional RDA of anything when she gave us those Lifesavers. I don’t think she taught us a “life lesson,” either. I mean, it never made me go home and start insisting that we say grace before each meal. I would have been too shy to suggest that.

But in that pausing, in that praying, in the observing and anticipating of the bright, red taste of the Lifesaver, I think I did discover what ritual does: it awakens our senses—and that’s a huge thing. Ritual makes us aware of our surroundings, our breathing, our being. Well-done ritual calls us to the things of this endlessly blessed, endlessly messy God-made world.

But—and this is a big, big, “but”—ritual can’t mean anything to us until we are taught how to read it. Just like learning the alphabet as a child, it’s necessary that we have some kind of training for spiritual literacy. In other words, we need teachers.

Because nothing means anything—the alphabet remains a strange code, a foreign language remains mysterious sounds, a musical chart is as confusing as a nautical one--without someone there to help us take hold of the meaning. We need teachers for everything because there are so many things to learn.

But who teaches us spiritual literacy?

Well, if we are lucky enough to have any kind of spiritual training at all as kids—and so many are not--it's our long ago Sunday School teachers. And sure, "Sunday School" has such a quaint and old fashioned sound to it. But it is also the one place—in all of our lives—where we are taught about praying, about the Hebrew and Christian stories, about giving, about service to others. Sunday School is the one place—it may be for some of us the one place in all of our lives—where we are taught how to read and learn the poetry of ritual. And you know what? That's what teaching confirmation is all about. I always have loved doing it.

And guess what? You know what a pastor does on the Sunday when you're going to confirm the confirmands? She gets to play Sunday School teacher again. Because particularly on Pentecost, the day we hail as the birthday of the early Christian church, it's a good time to learn about our history so that we can learn something about where we should be going as followers of God.

So—sharpen you pencils, whip out your ballpoints or iPads. Take some notes!

Think back to the beginning of the book of Genesis. The name Adam, as in "Adam," the first human created in the Genesis creation story, is a play on words. The word for "earth" or "mud" in Hebrew is "adamah." So Adam is made from earth. He's clay. We say that we, ourselves, are made of clay. That from dust we came and to dust we shall return, right. But take a look at what's happening in the story from the eleventh chapter of Genesis today, the story of the tower of Babel. The people make bricks from the clay that they find in the land of Shinur. They decide they're going to make a mighty tower and all speak one language and make a name for themselves in this way. And why? Because they don't want to be scattered! They want to stick together. Birds of a feather and all that, you know? Is that a bad thing?

But guess what? God's got other plans. We read this:

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Why ever did the Lord do that? They were just trying to stick together, be a community, stand strong together. Who could blame them? Oh, but they were only made of clay, no more lasting than the bricks they try to build a lasting tower out of.

Okay, switch now to the story of the forked tongues of fire landing on the peoples' heads in the book of Acts, several millennia later. This is a weird story, about the birth of the early church. And we read:

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

Oh, I can't tell you how much I love this passage. "And how is it that we hear, each in our own native language speaking about God's deeds of power?" And all were amazed and perplexed.

Well, when we are amazed and perplexed, that's when I believe we really do begin to understand something—some small thing—about God's deeds of power. I mean, when life is easy and routine and we rest on our laurels and savor how we do things because "that's the way we've always done it," then we're not on the lookout for what God is trying to show us. We're not. We're being restful. And there is a time for rest. It's call Sabbath. But it's only a seventh of our time. It's during that seventh of our time that we get to veg and rely on the same-old, same-old: Mom's pot roast. Dad in the Barcalounger, cartoons on TV. Or whatever particular jam your veg is.

But in the wind and flame of Pentecost, God is saying two things. So listen up. This is what I think God is saying and what we are called to hear:

I confused your language once. But now I'm making you understand—or trying and hoping you will come to understand--each other in different languages.

And I think God is also saying this: *yep, it's going to stretch your minds and your mind's muscles. But get to it, you Medes and Parthians, you Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, you visitors from Rome, you Phrygians and folks from the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene.*

And maybe God is also saying, with some urgency *get to it, you Cretans and Arabs, you Lutherans and United Methodists, you RCs and Anglicans, you GenXers and Boomers, you Millennials and you SBNR-ers (which is, in case you didn't know, "spiritual but not religious"). You've all got to get on board a bit more than you have. Because you've got the power to make the world a better place.*

Okay, I'm done speaking as if I were God. Now I'm back to speaking as if I were your Sunday School teacher. Because, in the end, that *is* what I am. And here's what I know:

In confirming Delia, Hailey and Sade today, we are hoping they are and will continue to be curious and hungry and committed to figuring out how the Holy Spirit acts in their lives and how they can live into that holiness. But, the people of this community at St. John's, we've got to do our part, too. We have to be curious and hungry and committed to figuring out how the Holy Spirit acts in our lives and how blessedly best we can live into that holiness.

As the community of God gathered at St. John's, we must be bold and trusting. We must not be afraid to be scattered—as those insecure clods of earth who tried to build the tower of Babel were afraid to be scattered. Because in our scattering, we carry the seed of the salvific and loving word of God.

And so we also must not be afraid to listen to the voices that speak in various tongues as we discern a new way to be the faithful to God who has promised us that we will never, ever be left orphaned. We are claimed and named, God's daughters and sons. *That* is our heritage, not a building, not a denomination, not an address nor a fund.

And so I come back to Libby Lastrup—excuse me, “Mrs. Lastrup” and the prayer said over the super-delicious cherry red Lifesavers:

We gather in ritual precisely because ritual refers to something beyond itself:

Each week we sing a Psalm—beautifully, responsively—to remember our Hebrew ancestors and our ties and indebtedness to the people of the promise. We then gather at the communion rail where—oh, my God, your faces are so beautiful then!—where I give you the mysterious bits of sorta/kinda bread and a tiny slurp of wine or maybe a blessing on your head or your doll's head and we exchange a smile or even a tiny, shared tear. And thus we are joined. Not because that ritual is complete in itself, but because we trust—or we blindly hope—that God is somehow here with us in ways beyond what we can understand.

And so—Delia, Hailey, Sade, I hope you have been listening to all of this. Because this is your Sunday School teacher speaking now. There *will* be a test and it is called life. Life is messy, beautiful business, though you are not alone in it. And you will be cared for.

But--because you are a child of God and because this is your confirmation day and because I don't sugar coat and I don't lie, know this: In our life of faith we are called to care for others. You are gifted to do that beyond your knowledge; you are equipped beyond any platitudes assuring you that you are. The daughters of the lions are lions, too. Remember, you are God's daughters. And that is everything. Amen.