

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

 `In the last days it will be, God declares,
 that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
 and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
 and your young men shall see visions,
 and your old men shall dream dreams.
 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.
 And I will show portents in the heaven above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
 The sun shall be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood,
 before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "

The "Day of Pentecost." If the word means anything at all to most people, it probably brings Pentecostalists to mind – those folks outside the mainstream of the Protestant church who emphasize a form of direct personal experience of God that they call a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues, for Pentecostalists, is the evidence that the

baptism has taken place. And the most publicized version of speaking in tongues is the ecstatic gibberish that televangelists spotlight.

Mainline Protestants and the Catholic side of the house disagree with a lot of Pentecostal theology, but *all* Christians share roots in the experience of the disciples gathered in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago.

The disciples had come together to celebrate Shavuoth, the Jewish Feast of Weeks. Shavuoth, for first century Jews, was an agricultural festival where farmers offered to God the first wheat from their crops. In earlier centuries, they brought two wheat loaves, and their first and choicest fruits to the Holy Temple as both a sign of gratitude and a prayer for the safe harvest of the remainder of the crop.

Jews still celebrate Shavuoth; this year, it started last night and will end on Monday. The day commemorates God's liberating the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt beginning on Passover as well as God giving Torah, God's teaching, to Moses on Mount Sinai 50 days after Passover. And in the Greek that most first century Jews spoke, the name of that festival on the "fiftieth day" was Pentecost.

At the time Luke's writing about the apostles was captured, and for centuries ever since, the Jews have been a minority in a sea of cultures who either didn't care about or actively hated them, their God and their traditions.

Twenty-first century North American Christians have little to complain about surrounded, as we are, not by cultures who hate us, but by people mostly disinterested in our spiritual practices and traditions. We, it seems, are afloat in a sea of indifference.

About 11 percent of the people in Washington, Oregon and British Columbia call themselves Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican, and about 10 percent consider themselves evangelical or Pentecostal, while another 20 percent are mainline Protestant, Mormon, Jewish or Muslim.

That leaves about 60 percent of our neighbors who do not self-identify as religiously connected. They mark "none" on surveys about religion. We live in what sociologists call a "none" zone. Many sociologists and more than a few religious leaders interpret a "none zone" to mean a religious vacuum.

Some of the more conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches see the same statistics as a vast untapped opportunity and

they are becoming quite imaginative in their efforts to convert an unclaimed audience.

And quite a few of the more liberal mainline churches are busy apologizing for church history or distancing themselves from the narrow-mindedness and violence that is still being promoted in the name of Christianity.

Now, on the one hand, the unbridled quest to convert everyone to one way of responding to the Divine seems disrespectful, even insulting. On the other hand, post-colonial guilt and self-recrimination seem poor excuses for not sharing the love of God.

More to the point, both the conservative evangelical and the liberal mainline approaches seem to involve talking *at* people rather than talking *with* people.

There is a middle way that might prove fruitful for us, being Episcopalians, to consider.

If we could stop apologizing for events in church history in the hopes for a better past, we wouldn't always have to be on the defensive. If we could relax our biases and personal agendas so that we could speak in ways that respect other people's dignity and integrity, we wouldn't have to be on the offensive.

Imagine if the Holy Spirit were to fill us with language that people who call themselves "nones" could hear as their own. A way of talking with people who think of themselves as "spiritual-but-not-religious" that makes it at least *possible* for them to entertain the offering of God's love.

Imagine, just like in Luke's story of the multitude gathered in Jerusalem, each one amazed to hear words filled with meaning for them – language that speaks to their actual circumstances.

In our own time, we will see more and more people with no church background or with a fragile memory of church that no longer inspires. Whether we wring our hands about them or seek them out, they do show up. At church, at work, at school, in our daily lives. A handful are looking for apologies, but we can speak with all of them without insisting that they think exactly like we do and without defensiveness.

They see the headlines. They see church-people fired up about pro-life versus pro-choice as if these were two *different* things and not

two aspects of a very complicated issue. “Spiritual-but-not-religious” people see that there are now, on average, one school shooting a week – one *school* shooting – every week.

One of Friday’s events left ten people dead and ten others wounded and another left one dead and one wounded. Unchurched people will watch as we offer our thoughts and prayers and not much else. To them, our inaction makes it seem that we’re sad but apparently okay with children being killed, as long as they aren’t fetuses.

Some “spiritual-but-not-religious” folks may be surprised that some of us who are “spiritual-*and*-religious” are capable of nuanced thought and aware that the world is not as simple as “either/or.” And they might be astonished to hear that we are also horrified by religious leaders who align themselves with the powers of Empire or by wars fought in the name of Christ or by those who use scripture to defend homophobia, racism or misogyny.

So what can we say to them in a way that they can hear something more life-giving?

Reverend Dr. Lillian Daniel is a preacher, teacher and author who says that there are at least four types of unchurched “nones.” She calls these four types No Ways, No Longers, Never Haves and Not Yets, and she suggests helpful ways to speak to these folks.

People in the “No Way” category have made a deliberate and well-thought out decision not to attend church, often in reaction to a genuine hurt. We may do well to apologize to people whose grievances and heartbreaks with religion are real. Abusive clergy. Dismissive theology. Unyielding narrow-mindedness. We can talk about more inclusive ways of being church, but as Pastor Daniel says, “sometimes ‘no way’ really means ‘no way’.”

The “No Longers” are those who used to come to church, often as children. About half of the 60 percent of our neighbors who mark “none” on surveys about religion still claim to be Catholic or Protestant. They just don’t go. Many of them have simply drifted from church. They may return for major life events like weddings or a funerals, but they tend to think of the church as irrelevant. Until, that is, they feel a lack in their lives. If our welcome back is spoken respectfully and non-judgmentally, sometimes they like what they hear.

The next two categories are the “Never Haves” and the “Not Yet.” There are increasing numbers of people who have never experienced church. Some are the grown children of “No Way” or “No Longer” parents who have passed down their anger, their hurt or their disappointment in the church.

Because the “Not Yets” tend to be open and curious, they may choose to show up just to see. Too often, we talk to them as if they were “No Longers” or “No Ways,” by answering questions they are not asking. We describe the ways that we are not like other churches assuming that they have experiences of religion that they don’t actually have. They may more interested in talking about we are up to and who we think we are praying to.

Talking with “Never Haves” or “Not Yets” to hear their dreams and visions, their worries and needs, is a pathway for the Holy Spirit to refresh and grow the church. We can trust the draw of a tradition that is ancient and larger than all of us.

The Holy Spirit that gave birth to that tradition is still breathing, if a little more gently. She has been inspiring God’s people for thousands of years, “pushing and pulling each other,” as Pastor Daniel says, “back to a core message of God’s love [that] sharpens and corrects the church, with reforms, mystical revelations, brave acts and courageous stands.”

The time has come to stop defining ourselves by what we are not, and learn to describe ourselves as who, and *whose*, we really are. Recognizing that God is not *contained* in any historical religion, we do find God’s presence in this place, in our worship and our symbols. And through the Holy Spirit, we can teach people how to apprehend God’s presence in the mystery that cannot be comprehended.

Here, in this house, we receive the Body of Christ, invoking the Holy Spirit to enable us to become the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit that appeared like fire 2000 years ago is the same Spirit energizing us today to speak with joyful clarity and to *act* with loving purpose.

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