

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller  
The Day of Pentecost  
4 June 2017

Scripture readings:

Numbers 11:24-30    Psalm 104:25-35, 37    1 Corinthians 12:3b-13    John 20:19-23

At the 8 o'clock mass today I began with an apology before I read the gospel. Now why would a priest in the Church apologize before reading the gospel of Jesus Christ? Well, I'll tell you. We had two Jewish guests here, so how could I, without saying anything, have read these words? "*And the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.*" What was the religion of the first Christians? Who were those Jews?

Well, you know this is the gospel of John, and John can be very, very problematic if read without thinking about it because that can be read - and maybe it was intended - in the very early days of the Church - to be anti-Semitic. What's meant by this? In the epistle lesson that we read just before this, we read, "*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*"

Do you hear people say today: "*It's evening, it's the first day of the week, and the doors of our house where we are meeting are locked for fear of Muslims.*"? Let's get real. Religion never, ever supports terrorism. That's not what we're talking about, but Christians over the centuries have, in fact, terrorized people. Have you ever heard of something called the Spanish Inquisition? Have you ever experienced the extraordinary hatred between Protestants and Catholics in Hudson County, New Jersey? *[laughter]*

I remember in my first parish the first Lent I was there, Joe Plunkett at St. Mary's in West New York, just across the street and up the hill from us, became a very good friend. Roman Catholic. His parents were immigrants. Oh no - they spoke another language. They came from Ireland. They had accents.

Joe was old enough to have studied at the big Roman Catholic seminary in North Jersey. He was old enough to have done all of his seminary studies in Latin. Those were the days when priests dressed in their cassocks and all of their classes were taught in Latin. He became a very good buddy. I still hear from him occasionally.

Now I was ordained in 1975 on Pentecost which was on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May that year. Our first Lent together we decided that St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church which was one of six major Roman parishes in a ten-block radius...down the street from us was St. Joe's which counted between 40 and 60 thousand parishioners. I wasn't dealing with numbers like that. We were still worshipping in German.

Joe and I decided that my first Lent we would do some things together. There was a program produced by the Archdiocese of Newark for the Roman Church called *From Ashes to Easter*. I'll never forget it. I went back to my parish and said we were planning to do this. "*Pastor, you don't know what they're like! You are going to run people out of here!*" So I asked a question: "*How many people attended Lenten liturgies last year?*" "*Well, maybe six.*" I said, "*Well, then we won't run many out.*"

We had to move to a larger room. We had everybody there from both sides of the fence. And the real important issue was whose brownies were better, *[laughter]* whose curtains were newer. *[laughter]*

We had for generations closed the door for fear of fill-in-the-blank - Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Protestants. We have reason to fear violence. We have reason to fear hatred. We have reason to fear injustice. We have reason to fear a lot of things, but we have no excuse for being ignorant of our own traditions, its responsibilities, its glories, and those of others. It was Gandhi who said something to the effect that if you really want to be a good whatever you are, you owe it to yourselves to study the scriptures of every other tradition.

So frankly, friends, at the beginning of the 8 o'clock mass I was embarrassed because two Jewish women sat here. I know these women socially. When they came into church they asked, "*Where is the Jewish section?*" *[laughter]*

We were celebrating first communion, and the complexities of religion became even more intense when

I remembered that the great grandmother of the two Tufano girls had attended Neal and Jen's wedding some years ago - Noni. The joke was that Elaine Strong's husband, Al, went to visit Noni in the hospital sometime before when she was sick. He didn't know her last name, and he asked at the desk to see "Noni." [laughter] They couldn't find her.

She attended the wedding, and before the next weekend she was dead. Naturally I attended the funeral at a huge Roman Catholic Church near Scranton. During that funeral mass before communion was distributed I was informed that since I was not a Roman Catholic in good standing, I was not to receive. I know that.

Joe Plunkett and I never did that. We had a priestly agreement between us. We would never scandalize our congregations, but if we were ever in either tradition in a place where we were not known to be leaders, we would receive together. That's how we handled that.

So I was told at this funeral not to receive, and I didn't. And during the distribution all of a sudden I heard Monsignor whoever-he-was start to bawl, "*Stop her! Get that woman! Stop her!*" He left the altar with a paten full of bread, beat a hot path across the front of a very large church, up the side aisle, and into the pew of the woman he was chasing and bent over her and bawled her out for not having eaten her communion at the altar. Then back to continue to distribute the Eucharist to the people waiting in the aisle. I don't want to come off as pointing fingers. This is all for our information. I learned the week after that, that that young woman was fourteen years old. If she ever goes back to church again in her life, I don't know why. I don't know why.

So not that long ago at 8 o'clock in this very place young children are receiving, and what's our message to those who come - strangers, family members, possibly Christian, and some certainly not? You know that in July I'm heading to Strasbourg in France for the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Lutheran/Catholic Dialogue Ecumenical Conference there. 51 years ago was probably during Vatican II, right? We've talked for half a century. The Reformation is now five centuries old. This year is 500 years since Luther nailed the 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. Where have we come? What are we saying about people - other people and people who are different from us?

Do you want to know what I did at the communion? They were back down there. I couldn't see them not being a part of the circle, and I asked whether or not they wished to receive that bread which the kids had made. They chose not to, and that was fine. But my question was if Jesus were here, would he be allowed to? And Jesus' mother was not an Italian Catholic. She was Jewish. His father was Jewish. His God was Jewish, and so was Jesus. That's why he died - because the religious structures of his day and the political structures of his day wanted him to be afraid of people and stay away from people, and he didn't, and they hated him because he sat down with sluts and beggars and tax collectors and sinners and crooks and gangsters. And he said to the religious people of the day, "*God created us. God loves them as much as God loves you.*"

The words in St. John I think are words of the early Church trying to establish itself as something different, something better than what had gone before because some people saw in Jesus a different approach to religion and instead of saying this grows out of that tradition, they had to say this is different from that tradition. So there is to this day in theological circles a discussion of whether or not the communion which we will approach later in this liturgy is an extension of or an evolution of the Passover meal. I don't have any trouble in believing that it is.

We all do it. We choose to call being afraid of those things that are different, being afraid of ideas that are different, being afraid of beliefs about a loving God that are different - we choose to see that as a cause for fear and for locking doors. And if we're going to be afraid of Jews, friends, then we're going to lock Jesus out. Because guess what? That's why the third Magus at the adoration of the Magi kneels before that infant and spreads his knees to see that little circumcised penis. Here is not only a human being, but a Jew.

"*For fear of the Jews*" - right out of John's gospel. We have some waking up to do. We have some growing up to do as Christians, and fortunately we have work to do as faithful people. We need a challenge. We need to be kept alive. We need to be kept thinking, and we need to be kept growing in our faith. "*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them. 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'*"

We forgot to extinguish the Pascal Candle at the reading of the gospel today. Oh man, I made a mistake!

This is a symbol of the end of Easter. That's why the Pascal Candle has moved to the Baptismal Font. It will be lighted at every baptism and at every funeral to remind us of Easter. It's a symbol that our celebration of Easter is over after fifty days. Pentecost, by the way, is a word we get from Judaism. Fifty days after planting, Pentecost was the harvest - seven weeks - seven sevens are forty-nine plus one. *Pente*, of course, is Greek for five.

It takes centuries and we're still in the process, but Christians come to see in the person of Jesus - whom I think we must fearlessly continue to remember is, was, lived, believed and died a Jew - Christians see in Jesus a particular revelation of God's love and so are led to extend the equation that God is love, Jesus was extraordinarily loving and, therefore, Jesus must be God. I think that's the foundation stone of what it is we encounter when we encounter our own grief. When somebody we love and who has loved us dies, we grieve because we are afraid that God, in fact, has died. True love is gone.

Jesus says that's not the case. When Jesus dies the Church finds it so intolerable to believe that he dies that we have this whole season of Easter when we read and remember the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. He's not in the tomb, he's raised. He's not only raised from the dead, he appears to people - making breakfast on the beach, breaking bread with them on the road to Emmaus. God is with us in the person of Jesus, but Jesus finally evaporates in the Ascension on Thursday a week ago, and now what in the world are we supposed to do without God? Well, Jesus said, *"I will give you God. I will give you God present with you. I will give you the Spirit. Just stick around in Jerusalem, and you'll start to know what I mean."*

And so it is we gather here, and that's what these balloons are all about - just to remind us of the tongues of fire that came down. They are able then to speak in other tongues. It doesn't say they insisted that everybody speak their own language. That's an imperialistic idea. You know what I mean. *"Vie don't they learn to spick Enklish the vay vee dit?" [laughter]*

The gospel says nothing about dumbing down. It says something about sharing. And this is a sort of bookend to the whole Tower of Babel experience which uses language and culture to divide people and pit them against each other - or that's the understanding. Difference is an invitation for us to believe that that which is different - language, culture, gender, age, color, all that stuff - is an invitation to unity, that God is God precisely because God can love those whom we cannot, and therefore we are not given an excuse to hate those we don't understand and we're afraid of. And that's not to condone violence. Don't get me wrong! But it's also not to condone ignorance about other people - their condition and their faith lives.

So we gather here to feel God's presence with us as a Spirit that comes to each and every one of us, our own situation notwithstanding, and to assure us that no matter what crap we will face in the next week in terms of challenge to our peace, our families, our own lives, our health, our situations, our addictions, our perversions, our sinfulness - the Church made it easy when it came up with a three-letter word "sin" so we wouldn't have to go through the whole list, but you say "sin" and everybody just turns off - Jesus' assurance is that *"God is with you even if you can't see me."*

And the early Church understands that when they gathered they sensed that presence, and St. Paul and others developed this idea that the Church is the Body of Christ, that none of us is asked to be or do what Jesus did. First of all, we have made it impossible because we see Jesus as sinless and having come into the world without his mother having had sex. Well now, none of that is a possible option to any of us. That may be a good thing because you don't have to be the Christ. But we call ourselves Christ's because we belong to Christ and are members of the Body of Christ

It's important for us to remember what Jesus' traditions were. I could honestly say to our Jewish friends this morning at 8 o'clock that my experience with the Jewish community, particularly at times of Passover and so forth, has been nothing other than hospitable and welcoming and inclusive and loving. So how could we, who call ourselves sons and daughters of a Jew, celebrate a meal here and exclude Jesus' descendants, relatives, family? How dare we!

And of whom are we afraid? Well, I suggest that we're afraid of ourselves. We're afraid that if we really believe that God is love and Jesus comes to bring peace - not a sword, but peace - in the gospel today Jesus

stood among them and said, "*Peace be with you*" - that will change our lives significantly and how we live in the world and how we relate to others. Change comes to us hard, but change can also bring new life and love. And so today on Pentecost I invite you to believe that the tongues of fire descend on you as much as they did on anybody else two thousand years ago and that you have been given and are the recipients of divine, eternal, complete, sufficient and thorough-going love which you don't earn, you don't deserve, you don't merit, but which is God's complete, free, willing gift to you. That's what we're afraid to believe, and that having been given that gift and having received that gift, we are then liberated beyond imagination to share that love and being so liberated, we're not afraid of anything other than keeping what isn't ours to ourselves.

So we don't have to lock the doors for fear of the Jews or for fear of the Muslims because two thousand years from now when somebody's reading this story of this congregation as a part of a worship service - which could possibly happen - we don't want the leader of worship to be embarrassed because there might be two Muslims sitting there as well as Jews!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.