

Pentecost envisions universal togetherness

I was nine years old. It was "Sports Day" in small town Saskatchewan. Everyone in the known universe was there.

I had six dimes in my Red Tag jeans--money my mother had given me to spend at my wild discretion. My favorite food group, Fudgsicles, were a convenient ten cents.

While savoring my first of the day I noticed I was being watched. A boy, younger than me, bare feet, bad clothes, his body a smudge, his small face turned to me.

I walked over and gave him one of my dimes. He bought a Fudgsicle and came back and stood beside me. I gave him the rest of my dimes. And we stood together behind the chicken-wire fence watching a ball game. Me, elated and no clue why without money to buy Fudgsicles. Him, grinning and dripping chocolate.

I know this kind of experience is not unique to me. I believe these small epiphanies are given to us as signs of what it is to be truly human.

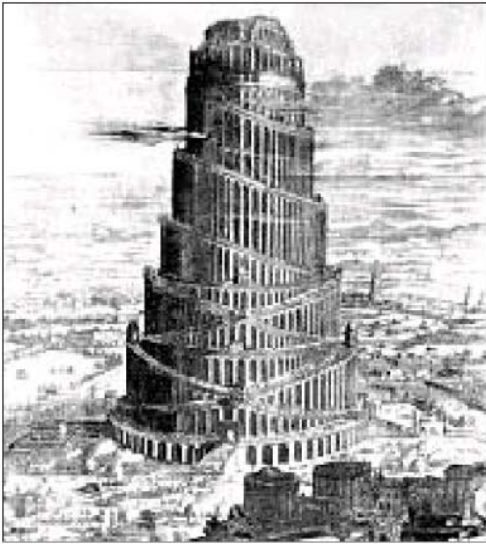
I also know that I have betrayed this experience and its meaning a thousand times. I didn't have to learn to be self-absorbed, or secretly competitive, or biased, I picked it up naturally.

And with this I picked up a knack for sorting out the "true Christians" from the non-Christians, or the "carnal-Christians," or the straight up pagans, or for that matter, anyone other than Baptist.

So even today when I hear the word Pentecost, I think of a particular stripe of Christianity and a particular way of being a Christian. And I'm reminded of larger and deeper divisions. The many divisions within protestant Christianity, the greater division of Catholic and Protestant, the division of world faith traditions, and finally the divisions of holy and profane.

But Pentecost is not a denomination. Pentecost—this time that marks the end of the Easter season and the beginning of "ordinary time" in the Christian liturgical calendar—is all about the undoing of division.

While the ancient story of the Tower of Babel describes a world fractured through misunderstanding, and scattered by subsequent tribal wars and blood-feuds, Pentecost is the radical coming together of the broken and the undoing of confusion and misunderstanding.



The Tower of Babel by Athanasius Kircher, 1679

The book that follows on the heels of the Gospels, and brings accounts of the effects of the Gospels, relates this coming together in images of wind and flame.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter and his band of apostles were suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in languages that "all the nations under heaven" could understand. In this contagion of clear understanding all the barriers were being burned and blown away.

But Peter had to relearn the meaning of his own blazing experience. He was given a dream. The contents of heaven were lowered to earth in a sheet and inside he saw all the different species of animals mingled together—in his world the unclean with the clean.

It was a reoccurring dream that finally ended with Peter's face to face receiving of someone culturally, historically, and religiously outside of his circle. Of this Peter explains, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.

This was Peter's time to stand beside his new friend, elated, barely comprehending the revolutionary beauty and possibility of his inclusive act.

Pentecost envisions universal restoration. Pentecost is the dream of togetherness, the dream of the sacredness of all things.

But it is still a dream in-waiting. We've read the stories but we really haven't been possessed by them. We still prefer the neat divisions of us and them because it's easier to be over and above than to love. Easier to manufacture division than to merge with differences and work creatively within them.

It is achingly hard to find our meaning beyond divisions because from childhood we have been candle-dipped in ways of pegging others and identifying with any inside group. Some of us even call this a gift of discernment. Thinking it a skill valuable for staying on the righteous side of some line.

The manufacturing of division pretends to give us meaning. But the story of Pentecost gives us our meaning in love, in inclusion, in beauty, in seeing the earth, our world, as holy, as one.

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