

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15 3

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**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

A number of years ago when I served as a rector in San Diego, the parish had the opportunity to determine whether or not it would authorize the blessing of same-sex unions and marriages. The bishop at the time asked clergy to lead church-wide discernment conversations leaving vestries to make the final decision. The two women who wished for their civil union to be blessed by the church were fairly well known to me. I had worked with one of them a lot on various ministries related to homelessness in our area. Both had military careers. One in the marines, the other in the army. Yet as I heard the story of their relationship, I began to see how little I knew of their struggles as a couple. They described the fear they had lived with for years that their military careers would have been over in an instant had their relationship been discovered. Their witness helped me see a civil rights struggle in deeply personal and spiritual ways. It was a humbling and holy experience for me and helped me think again about the lives of people for whom the law made no room to live and thrive. As I later learned, I was not the only one to have my eyes opened.

At the end of the parish-wide discernment process the vestry met in the church hall so that everyone could attend. Among our vestry was a retired navy captain, a man I greatly admired – a prototypical pillar of the church if there ever was one. When he took his turn to speak he rose from his seat. As he did, his voice shook as he described how he had come to think again and that the discernment process had led him through a profound journey of inner change. Others affirmed his experience. In the end, the vestry voted unanimously to approve. For me, now after nearly 20 years of ordained life, that moment stands out as having a rare kind of holiness to it – not because of the outcome as much as what happened to get us there. Something had changed in a number of those vestry members, and we all felt it in our bones.

The story of Pentecost is also about bone-deep change. I've always loved the drama of the scene that we read in Acts. The first followers of Jesus are all together. Walls form a safe boundary to an outside world that not long before had executed their friend. Their shared memories of Jesus offered them an inner world that they could hold in common, unchallenged within the safety of their voluntary confinement. And then in the story, as can be the case in our own lives when we persuade ourselves that everything is in its place and buttoned down, stuff happens. Holy stuff to be exact: 'a sound like the rush of a violent wind', 'divided tongues, as of fire', and the gift of speaking in languages none of them had learned yet each could understand. With dramatic flourish Peter gets to his feet to proclaim in the words of the prophet Joel that God 'will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh'. Through all of this, he and the other disciples are woken up at that depth of awakening that only the Holy Spirit can call us into. Something was changed in them, and the church was born.

Pentecost is called the birthday of the church not because something of God becomes present that was not there before, but because the people God calls to be the church are animated beyond the confines of their imaginations. It is the birthing of the church because it is the beginning of a life of faith lived beyond the material presence of God in Jesus, a faith long-known by the people of Israel who followed that same unseeable God through the long years of exile and return. Indeed, it is a life of divine animation that we have always known deep in our bones, begun as it was in God's breathing into Adam's flesh thus making life out of human form.

Pentecost, therefore, is not merely the story of the birthing of the church, it is the story of our new birth too. For the life of faith is a life of waking up. Augustine describes it as a stillness that comes upon him after a life-long struggle with restlessness. The great preacher John Wesley, deliverer of over 40,000 sermons of words, describes that same animation of the Spirit in his life with just two: of feeling 'strangely warmed'. For Moses it is the burning bush, for Saul, the Damascus road. King or slave, rich or poor, the common theme of each of these encounters of the Spirit is that we are not intended to be left the same as we had started when we choose to walk our way with the God whose wind blows where she wills. The life of faith is a life of animation, of awakening, of thinking again, of being turned around and back to the God who always draws us onward.

The problem of being human, though, is how easily we get lost in inertia. The Spirit beckons us forward and we freeze on the spot. A new birth in our lives is just around the corner, but we hesitate to head that way preferring the familiar and the sure. In his latest book, *Think Again*, Adam Grant explores what can help us to 'think again' and see the world differently to how we see it today. He describes a practice called motivational interviewing working with people hesitant about vaccinations not by trying to persuade them, but by trying to understand them. There's Columbia University's 'Difficult Conversations Lab', that helps people avoid what psychologists call the binary bias - our tendency to simplify a complex continuum of views on any given topic into just two categories, no matter the topic at hand.

For me the most powerful example Grant describes of how we can wrest ourselves from the inertia of being unchanged is what you and I might call communion. Assessing 500 studies involving over a quarter of a million people carried out over the past half century, social psychologists confirmed what most of us know to be true from our daily lives: that we become less prejudiced about others (in over 90% of cases, apparently) when we have contact with them. It's a wonderful confirmation of a core theological tenet of the Christian faith: that we are beings made for communion, made for contact with others. And as such, that proximity has the power to change us. It opens our eyes to lives we might otherwise never meet, and without whom we are less fully the persons that God intends for us to be.

Over the coming months, we hope as a church to forge some new opportunities for many of us to become more proximate with the lives of people we have yet to know and love, specifically across lines of racial difference. The discernment of exactly what those opportunities might be lies with a steering committee of saints who have been invited to help us pursue as a church equity and healing in this multi-racial city. Learning as we have from Atlantans active in the worlds of education, justice and the arts our hope is that as we begin to step out of our familiar places we might find in other's lives glimpses of our own hopes and fears; ways for mutual growth and care.

There are so many ways that each of us might find an opening to be animated by the Spirit and experience for ourselves the movement of God in our lives. 'Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams', says the prophet Joel. As we make our way out of this long year, how exciting it is to imagine the visions and dreams that are now being birthed in us, the people of God in this place and time. Truly, the only thing intended to be inert in the church is the building. For us, the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ, where the Spirit leads, we are called to go. Amen.