St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

Annandale, Virginia

7 June 2014

Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

The Rev. B. P. Campbell

**Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, and Race[[1]](#footnote-1)**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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.’ *(Acts 2:1-21)*

This morning I am going to talk about the two major themes of the Day of Pentecost. One of them you are familiar with: The Day of Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit of God. But the other theme you have probably never heard associated with the Day of Pentecost. And you might ask yourself why you haven’t heard it.

The Day of Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit of God.

And the Day of Pentecost is about Race.

The Holy Spirit and Race.

There are many other themes in the Day of Pentecost, because it is definitely the beginning of the Christian fellowship and represents the seed bed of all that is godly that has come after. It shows the initial vision of the coming of God’s kingdom to earth, as was foretold in the prophet Joel and quoted by Peter in this morning’s lesson from Acts: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,…’

But what happens when the Holy Spirit is poured out – when Jesus’ spirit gets let loose in the world for all to see? The most important thing, the most noteworthy thing, the most stunning thing that happens is that the barriers of race are transcended.

Race! From the beginning, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about race!

Why haven’t we heard that before? Why have we not heard that race is not secondary to the Gospel, but always at the beginning of it, and always at the end of it?

In the answer to that question is the story of the history of Judaism, and the history of Christianity, and the history of Virginia, and the history of this nation. Jesus transcends it all. And it is what we will talk about the remainder of this morning’s sermon.

1. Ancient Judaism contained seeds of racism.

2. The Christianity that came to America was a racist form of Christianity.

3. The Glory of Jesus Christ is wrapped up with his teaching on race.

**1. Ancient Judaism contained seeds of racism.**

Just to be clear from the onset, I am not preaching anti-Semitism here. The Jews are no worse on race than pretty near everybody else in the world. And in terms of countering racism, Jews have done as much or more than other ethnic groups to break it down. They have been persecuted horribly for their own racial identity, -- unspeakably.

But one of the seeds of racism in the world is the assumption that God regards your race as especially chosen and privileged over other races and religions. There’s a lot of that in the Hebrew Scriptures. We have to acknowledge it. The reason we have to acknowledge it is not because we want to point out that the Jews have racial issues. It is because Western Christianity took over some of the worst heresies of Judaism, blessed them, and recycled them as Christian doctrines.

Jews divided the world into “us” and “them.” “Us” was the Jewish people. “Them” was the Gentiles – all the other races and ethnic groups, with their languages and governments. Four hundred years before Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. In that Greek translation, the Hebrew word “goyim” is translated as the Greek word “eynh” – ethnic group. “Gentile” or “nation” in the Bible actually means “race” or “ethnic group.” When King James’ scholars translated the Scriptures into English – just as the settlers were invading Virginia, they did not translate “goyim” and “ethne” as “race” or “ethnic group.” They used the word “nation” and the obscure word “Gentile.” I wonder why King James’ translators men chose those words.

In the prophets, and sometimes in the five books of the Torah, the word of God stretched Judaism pretty far from its ethnocentricity. For example, Isaiah’s vision in 725 B.C. of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God was multi-ethnic and inclusive. He called on the ”house of Jacob” – the people of Israel’s race, religion, and lineage – to “walk in the light of the Lord,” and said that this would result in a union of all peoples:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! *(Isaiah 2:2-5)*

I’m sure you’ll notice that in this passage Isaiah is certain the calling of all peoples, all religions and ethnic groups, will happen on Mount Zion, -- in Jerusalem. The great celebration is multi-ethnic, but it will be on Jewish ground.

The best of Judaism, the spirit of God in that religion and revelation, the word of God in the prophets then and now, set the stage for Jesus’ direct revelation that the Holy Spirit transcended race and ethnicity altogether. But that’s not what European Christianity took from Judaism or from Jesus, at least not when they came to America.

Ancient Judaism contained the seeds of racism. And

**2. The Christianity that was brought to America was a racist form of Christianity.**

European exploration in the Western Hemisphere operated under principles stated clearly in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V, writing in a Papal Bull called *Romanus Pontifex*. In that statement of doctrine by the leader of European Christianity, the Pope specifically authorized Alfonso V of Portugal to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”

Just so we’re all clear about what is going on here: European Christian leaders believed it was proper, in the name of Jesus Christ, to take the land of people who were not Christian, without compensation, to seize their possessions, and to make them slaves forever.

When the English upper class came to Virginia, they did just that to the native people. They practiced Indian slavery, then white slavery with poor people off the streets of London, and finally the enslavement of Africans. When they began to write laws in 1660 that established legal ethnic distinctions between enslaved groups, they used the word “Christian” to mean “white European.” When by 1705 too many persons of African and other ethnic background had gotten baptized, the Virginia Slave Codes changed the word “Christian” to “white.”

Finally, in 1776, when our forefathers proclaimed that God created “all men… equal” and rebelled against the English, they established a free state for half the population and a totalitarian slave state for the other 50% -- with race being the crucial distinction. They had a half revolution – half to freedom, half to totalitarian racial control. It is a story we never tell that way, to our shame.

The Christianity that was brought to America was a racist form of Christianity. The European Christians stepped into the worst aspects of their religious tradition, interpreting the Jewish Scriptures in a more discriminatory form than Jews ever had done, claiming that European whites were God’s “chosen people” – better than everyone else -- created both to dominate and to save everyone else.

What happened to Jesus’ teaching during those 1600 years after Calvary and before Jamestown?

**3. The Glory of Jesus Christ is wrapped up with his teaching on race, made plain by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.**

There they were in Jerusalem on that day, people of all the ethnicities of the Mediterranean world, most of them Jews but some of them not Jewish, and the Holy Spirit came to all of them. They were different people, from different cultures, with different languages, of different genders, but they heard the same teaching in the same spirit. Their difference became an amazement, a blessing, not a source of prejudice or division. The Spirit had broken down what Paul calls “the dividing wall” between Jews and every other ethnic group. As he said to the Ephesians,

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, …that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”*(Eph.2:14-18)*

In his lifetime, Jesus had made his own position clear – with Samaritans, Syrians, Roman soldiers of different ethnicities, Greeks, Italians, men, women – “whoever does the will of my Father is my brother and sister.” The Feeding of the 5000 was an incredible multi-ethnic feast.

After the Day of Pentecost, the Book of Acts records an ever-expanding experience of inter-ethnic and inter-religious excitement, engendered by the Holy Spirit of Jesus. The Ethiopian eunuch and Philip. Peter and the Italian centurion, with the vision of a net coming down from heaven including all species of animals. Paul’s missions to multi-ethnic groups all over the Mediterranean. Everywhere the Holy Spirit is made known by the vivid experience of a common truth and status that crosses ethnic, religious, class, and gender lines.

The Glory of Jesus Christ is wrapped up with his teaching on race, made plain by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The breaking down of racial discrimination is the most dramatic sign of the kingdom of heaven.

The Day of Pentecost is the day of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And it is the day of God’s fulfillment of the promise of Race.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, in the excitement of the early Christian fellowships –- just as in the excitement of this Christian fellowship at St. Barnabas – racial and ethnic differences are a measure of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Day of Pentecost was exciting precisely because of the tremendous racial/ethnic diversity of the crowd.

In many ways the American problem is that we refuse to tell the truth about our own racist history, and therefore continue to perpetuate the structures and practices of our racist beginnings. This is an incredible nation. Our forefathers stated great ideals. But they did not practice them. They enshrined racial discrimination not only in personal prejudice, but in property, in economics, in government, in jurisdictional lines, and in many other ways that perpetuate oppression.

The true American Revolution, to the extent it is a divine revolution, has only begun. It’s part of a revolution that began thousands of years ago. Jesus said if you want to think you are chosen by God you need to begin by seeing yourself as a servant, as one in need of the divine physician to heal your own broken spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, it became clear what was going on. God wasn’t pretending he hadn’t created many different sorts of people and cultures. He celebrated the diversity. He was taking advantage of our racial, ethnic, and cultural distance to show just how powerful his love and his spirit could be. The measure of his love is the distance it has to travel and the barriers it must overcome. God’s spirit is incredible!

Pentecost is our great feast day. The Holy Spirit gathers us together. We are given the opportunity to celebrate the distance we have come, and to chart the distance we still have to go. We celebrate our growth together, and we commit ourselves to lives that dismantle the structures of prejudice and oppression. Here’s the way our story is told in the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Then one of the…angels … showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are **for the healing of *all the races.***

And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. *(Portions of Rev. 21-22)*

AMEN.

1. This sermon was preached to conclude a year of work on race relations at a special service *“From Repentance to Reconciliation”* at St. Barnabas’ Episcopal Church, Annandale, Virginia, on Pentecost, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)