

Today is Pentecost. All over the country, sanctuaries are dressed in red to remind people of the central metaphor of the day—it is the time the church lifts up this passage from Acts that talks about the day when a mighty wind blew through the church and divided tongues of fire, like flames, rested above the heads of the people. Amazing things happened, and people spoke and understood each other in different tongues.

As this happened, they were reminded of the words of the prophet Joel, who said: “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.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus names what is happening. He says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

Writer Edward Markquart says, “Truth. We all want truth. The search for truth is deep within the human spirit. Deep down inside all human beings, is the desire to know the truth, however good that may be or however painful it may be. A sign of health in us is that we search for the truth.”

The opposite is also true. We human beings don’t want to be deceived. We don’t want to be deceived by lies, distortions, and half-truths. A sign of sickness in us as human beings is that we try to avoid the truth or distort the truth or manipulate the truth. And we want to find the truth out about everything. All human beings have this spirit of truth, the desire to find truth in all aspects of our lives.

For example, we want to find out the truth about our universe and how it works. We want to find out the truth about the sun, moon and the stars. We want to find out the truth about the origins of our universe and the destiny of our universe. We want to find out the truth if there is life living out there somewhere in the universe. The purpose of the science of astronomy is to discover the truth about how our universe works. We want to know the truth. That is just the way we human beings are.

We want to find out the truth about ourselves. What makes us tick? Why we do things. Why we don’t. We are interested in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Why are human beings such warring animals? Why were there so many kamikaze pilots in World War II and so many terrorists willing to be human bombs? There is so much about human beings that perplex us.

We human beings want to know the truth about everything. It is like we human beings are on a quest, not for the Holy Grail, the cup of Christ from the Last Supper, but we are on a quest to find the Holy Grails, the truth about life in all of its infinite variations.

There are two events pointing to different truths that are happening today in this sanctuary. First, Sister Helen Prejean will be speaking at 2nd service and again for the public at 2:00 on the death penalty. For many, this is a very difficult and dividing topic, and as she even states in the video clip we saw today from, “Living the Questions,” rightfully so. There is so much emotion around the topic of what happens to a cold-blooded killer.

The second event at 5:00 is the appearance of Lt. Daniel Choi, an honored soldier much loved by those who he commands, and important to our military operations because he is a translator. However, because he told the truth about his sexuality, he is being dismissed from the military under the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy. This is happening as a slight majority of Californians won the right last week to strip civil rights from lgbt people.

Here are my main concerns in these areas, and they have to do with the church. Through polling, it has been discovered that more people who go to church support the war than those who don’t. More people who go to church support torture as a means of interrogation than those who don’t. More people who go to church support Prop 8 than those who don’t.

Here is one question I can ask on this day of Pentecost: Has Jesus has left the building?

David Gushee is an evangelical. He is a professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, and wrote an article in the May 5th issue of the *Associated Baptist Press* where he talks about why 62% of white evangelicals believe in torture. The numbers supporting torture decrease as church attendance decreases, to where only 42% of non-attendees support torture.

He addresses his article to Jesus, saying, “Any church—congregation, parachurch organization, denomination, or group of individual Christians—that supports torture has violated its confessed allegiance to you and can no longer be considered part of your true church. Let them be anathema.

“Jesus, I pray with all my heart for the survival of a remnant of faithful Christianity in this country. It goes far beyond torture. It has to do with whether we are really your people or are liars and hypocrites, just deluding ourselves on the way to Judgment Day.” His article required a disclaimer from the Baptist publisher, saying that his views did not necessarily reflect those of the magazine’s Baptist supporters.

As with torture, more American Christians support the war in Iraq than people who do not attend church. Support of the death penalty in the South especially, runs highest amongst self-described Christians.

Last week, I took part in the Day of Decision protest and march at the Orange County City Hall. This was to mark the decision upholding Prop 8 by the Supreme Court. In the online version of this sermon, I will post a link to a video of the street preachers who heckled us with bullhorns and vile signs. <http://www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-263476>

What they said and exhibited I would not go into here out of respect for our atmosphere of worship. When we marched to another area and it was my turn to speak, I noticed that the Christian hecklers who came out to make fun of a community in pain, had not accompanied us. Offhandedly, I said, “The Christians on the other side could not be with us. They had to go to an event at Red Lobster to protest the bib-wearing blasphemers who right now, are eating shell-fish, against the commandment in Leviticus.”

The response got a laugh that was a little bigger than it deserved, because it was aimed at people calling themselves, “Christian.” In Long Beach, a colleague of mine was asked to offer up a prayer before the march, and the protestors jeered at her and told her they didn’t care. They didn’t want her so-called “Christian bull.”

I wonder if the flames of Pentecost truly reach into our churches in America today, or if the spirit is with a Jesus and his followers who have, like Elvis, “left the building.” That is why it is so important for us to discern truth with open hearts and open minds in following the one variously called, “Lord,” “Christ,” “Head of the Church,” “Teacher,” and “Jesus.”

Sister Helen Prejean understands just how hard it is through her own journey that began with a simple request to visit a man on Death Row. That journey took her with him to his death, and on

the way, it made her understand the issues that surround the death penalty, including racism, underfunded schools, poverty, classism, and the extreme difficulty of acting on faith in the worst possible circumstances.

She names one person as the “hero” of her book. Lloyd LeBlanc was the father of the teenager named David, who was found shot in the back of his head in a field next to his girlfriend by the Sonnier brothers, whom Sister Helen visited in prison. LeBlanc identified his son’s body. He is a practicing Catholic, who could never kneel in prayer behind a teenager in church again without remembering what the bullet did to his son.

However, when he learned that the killers’ mother could no longer go into town for supplies and that people left dead animals on her porch, he visited her with a basket of fruit and told her that he did not hold her responsible. He also prayed for her.

LeBlanc befriended the nun who became her son’s killer’s spiritual advisor, and asked her to pray with him. To this day, she is invited as a guest in the LeBlanc home.

Sister Helen says that the cross has two arms. Unlike two sides where you either believe fully in the death penalty and everything that goes with it over here, and profess quite the opposite on the other side, that the arms of the cross are continuous and hold all of the hurt and pain in-between.

I know myself well enough that if someone near and dear to me were killed in a monstrous way, I could not in honesty declare that I would not want vengeance. My emotions would be too high. It was the words of then-governor Mario Cuomo that make the most sense to me, spoken when New York was re-contemplating the death penalty. I have to paraphrase, so this is the spirit of it: Cuomo said that he would want to go after the killer with his own bare hands if he could. But, he added, he wants to know that he lives in the kind of civil society built upon humanely constructed laws that would prevent him from such action, and further, would not name him and all of his fellow citizens as murderers by allowing the state to kill on their behalf.

Jesus said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

Today is the day of Pentecost. It marks fifty days after Easter, and it was the day when the Spirit moved among 120 worshippers. These people were able to understand their differences in such a way—through tongues and truth—that over 3,000 people were converted to their faith.

We are not people of faith who believe in torture, war, discrimination or vengeance. My prayer is that we will be known by our fruits, and be the hearts and hands of God working with the spirit to attract like-spirited people from the places, though full, are empty of a Jesus who has left the building. Amen.

Scripture Reading for Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. *2* 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. *3* Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. *4* All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. *5* Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. *6* And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard

them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” 14 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. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 “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. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

John 15:26-27; 16:12-15

26 “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. 27 You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

16:12 “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15 All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

A Prayer to Abolish the Death Penalty by Helen Prejean, CSJ

God of Compassion,
You let your rain fall on the just and the unjust.
Expand and deepen our hearts
so that we may love as You love
even those among us
who have caused the greatest pain by taking life.
For there is in our land a great cry for vengeance
as we fill up death rows and kill the killers
in the name of justice, in the name of peace.

Jesus, our brother,
you suffered execution at the hands of the state
but you did not let hatred overcome you.
Help us to reach out to victims of violence
so that our enduring love may help them heal.

Holy Spirit of God,
You strengthen us in the struggle for justice.
Help us to work tirelessly
for the abolition of state-sanctioned death
and to renew our society in its very heart
so that violence will be no more.
Amen.