

Scripture- Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23

word count: 2,213

Last week, someone said to me, “We were always taught that it was rude to talk about our faith with other people.” And that strikes a chord with most of us, because everyone in this room has been accosted at one time or another by someone who believes that if they convince someone to believe exactly the way they do, then they have won one for the Big Guy.

But there is a difference between talking about one’s amazing brushes with the divine, or even admitting one’s doubts and struggles with one’s spiritual life with other people, and being one of those folks I’ve mentioned that George Carlin warns us about when he says, “Never trust anyone who mentions Jesus more than 300 times in a five-minute conversation.”

Part one.

In our lifetimes we are experiencing more radical change than in any other time in history. The event of moving beyond the earth and past the realm we once thought was heaven and out into the universe is causing major upheavals in our sense of any fixed spirituality. We are all in it together.

I heard Sister Joan Chittister say that an event happened in the lifetime of most of us in this room that has done more to radically change humankind than any other at any time in history, and it involved a \$45 camera. The first manned mission into space was captured when John Glenn took his second-hand camera and aimed it through his little window at a blue globe spinning through the vapors around the sun.

We all knew this was the way things were, of course, but we were able at the same time to hang on to the romantic notion of an earth and heaven that were there exclusively for each other. With the click of a shutter, all that changed.

I don’t want to be too simplistic, but take a look at what has happened from the point of view given to us by that camera.

When presented with the reality that perhaps the truth is larger than the stories our faith tradition teaches us, three things can happen. You can embrace the new reality and discard the old entirely; accept the new reality, but try to make it fit in somehow with what you know; or dig in your heels and retreat from that reality, and even demonize it because it refutes what you hold to be sacred.

Our religious institutions have, over these last three to four decades, responded in any one of these three ways. We in the “Mainline” churches come from a tradition that believes strongly in science and education, influenced by the Age of Reason. People took the first two options. Many decided that the new reality meant that God was dead. They left the churches. The threat of hell being over, they could relax at home on Sunday morning. Or, those of us who remain sometimes feel like we are guilty of relativizing—making our faith tradition fit scientific reality, and that is uncomfortable for us.

Then there are the folks who took the third option. If you can stay with sister Joan Chittister’s idea that the world changed suddenly and dramatically, (and remember, a period of 100 years of fast-paced technology and scientific discovery is “sudden” when placed in the timeline of human history, is it any surprise that there has been an enormous rise in fundamentalism in the past few decades? It didn’t come out of no-where.

We don’t know how to cope. Some of us want to hit “delete” and start over. Others want to hold the line. To excommunicate. Traditionalists rise up claiming that we need to return to

the old values and all the conundrums will just go away. They need an enemy. We are increasingly polarized.

Here is an example of an excommunication took place as a result of the growing divide. A few years ago, the pastor of the East Waynesville Baptist Church told his congregation that some members of his church were against God because they voted for the wrong party's candidate. A majority excommunicated these eleven members—many of whom were people who had spent their lives at that church, and they were expelled. Forty members resigned in protest. Later, the pastor resigned—no doubt because it was made clear to him that a church cannot endorse a candidate or political party and keep their not-for-profit status. As a result, forty more members left the church with him, also in protest. This happened during the week of Pentecost, when our scripture talks about how the Spirit came down to the churches and filled so many different kinds of people, so that different as they were, when they spoke—they were understood.

In short, folks, this is what chaos looks like. We are living in the middle of a giant paradigm shift, and we don't know the shape of things to come. There are a lot of folks who want to believe in a Creator, but have difficulty reconciling the God they grew up hearing about with the idea of a limitless universe.

We are not fearful people—the future is not frightening, so there is no need to retreat, yet we struggle with the shades of gray, the feeling that sometimes things seem a little too relative. The old ways are comfortable, but dusty.

Part two.

Now, I want to step back for some perspective and take a look at our Spiritual history as a race, using the work of Robert Keck, author of several books on understanding spirituality.

Picture three interlocking circles. Think of the first circle as Epoch One of human history, taking place from 35,000 to 10,000 years ago. Let's think of this as the childhood stage of human development. During this time there was a unity with nature, and a profound respect for the powers of the animal world. There was an emphasis on the feminine aspect. Societies were matrilineal. Worship of the divine occurred through worshipping the goddess. These societies felt that they were part of the whole, and were therefore non-violent in nature.

Now think of that circle overlapping with the next circle. Another huge shift. Chaos. Epoch Two. We start with the iron age. Tools can be made, weapons forged, animals can be harnessed for work. Power structures start to come into place, and a fundamental shift from matrilineal to patriarchal structures starts the adolescent phase of humanity in the period of 10,000 years ago to today. As adolescents, humankind learns that it can wield power over others, begins a history of violence, demands conformity to rigid belief systems, acquires the need to control and dominate, and begins the separation from nature. The book of *Genesis* tells us that God gave "man" *dominion* over the earth and all that is in it. God is now in the shape of a male, not a female, and is characterized by power and control.

And now what? The third circle is overlapping the second, leading us to what we hope will be the adulthood stage of human development

Robert Keck uses the metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly. As a species, we are beginning the move into a new Epoch. We are living in a chrysalis. The caterpillar of the old Epoch is dying. The butterfly is about to be born in the new Epoch.

Christianity is also in a chrysalis. We are all a part of the whole. No wonder there are so many end-time religious groups. If your identity is with the caterpillar, you are sure to be threatened in a chrysalis that is closing in on you. If your identity is with the butterfly, then you are sure to see that we will be a resurrected. The word for butterfly and the word for soul are the same—Psyche.

Albert Einstein was once asked what the most important question was, and he replied, “Do you think the universe is a friendly place, or not?” This is the question that is facing us as we move into a new phase of our spiritual history as a people. To the caterpillar, while seeing the old go away, that is a frightening question.

But in the meantime, we could not possibly be living in more interesting times than we are now. Whatever possessed us to label the time we have known as “modern?” Where do you go after modern? Suddenly there is “post-this” and “post that.” What does this kind of labeling mean for the time that we are in if not for an acknowledgement that the old epoch is passing and that something completely new is beginning, and that we are experiencing that newness? We are “post-caterpillars,” not ready to understand ourselves as butterflies—we haven’t seen that transformation completed yet in order to call it by a name, but it is there.

Part Three.

Where is the Holy Spirit in all of this? If our identity is with the butterfly, how do we feel the presence of God moving through the churches today as it did in the winds of the first Pentecost? I’d like you to envision the Spirit of God outside of the box of our faith tradition.

As I was outlining, there are at least 35,000 years of human existence, in which time the Divine was worshipped in some form, even through the worship of the goddess in ancient societies. In all parts of the world there were theologies that viewed the Divine through the lens of their own traditions.

Now, let me ask you this. Do you believe that the essence of God is “love”? If you do, then do you think that the only right way of thinking about God developed through one text tradition in one region only, over the course of little more than 3,000 years, and specifically the last 2,000 years? Who then was the God that every other culture and tribe worshipped? Is God still God, even if God is called by another name, even a female name? Do you think a God of love would create a system of salvation that damned over thirty thousand years of human history plus everyone who is not associated with our faith today?

Are the winds of Pentecost that are blowing through our churches today telling us that these same winds can be felt in other traditions as well? Are the winds of Pentecost telling us that the Spirit of God is very much alive here today, and therefore we can experience our faith even more, knowing that God is much bigger than we have ever imagined God to be?

The story of Pentecost goes further than its historical reality. It is also a parable that urges us into the knowledge that the gospel is comfortable in any culture and its message finds easy residence in the languages, cultural and intellectual ways of countless societies. In other words, whoever seeks to move a culture towards transformation by Christ must join it, participating in the transformation from within.

God is not Western; God is not Eastern; God is not exclusively the God of classical culture or primitive culture; God is the Lord of the plethora, the God of the diverse, the redeemer of the plural. God has received worship as the God of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the goddesses of our earliest ancestors, the nature spirits of Native Americans. Likewise, God calls for response in different languages, dialects, and idioms, and for us, accepts them through our desire to follow Jesus.

Harold Best says, “Pentecost tells us that one artistic tongue is only a start and a thousand will never suffice. There is no single chosen language or artistic or musical style that, better than others, can capture and repeat back the fullness of the glory of God. No single culture can hold the wholeness of praise and worship or the fullness of the counsel of God.”

Are there people here who also feel that sometimes you are going through the motions in worship? Is recognizing that we are all in the presence of the Spirit of God a difficult concept? Is there anyone here who is thinking that whatever God actually ends up being, God isn’t the

same God that has been described for us? Is there anyone here who feels that they have a terrible secret—that they are having more trouble believing than they would like to admit to?

So today, here is my question for you on Pentecost Sunday. How are you going to live these questions?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus returns to the disciples and says, “Peace Be With You.” One of the last things he needs to tell them is that they should remember that the Holy Spirit will always be with them.

We are in the presence of a living faith because we are in the presence of that which we call God whose breath fills us even now, and whose breath has filled all ages and places of humanity, who in turn have recognized that Spirit by whatever names they called God.

Continue to think and talk about your faith. May the Spirit of Pentecost fill you, fill your hearts, and kindle the fire of your faith and your love. AMEN.

Sermon Resources

This sermon is based on notes taken at the Center for Progressive Christianity Seminar: “Will the Progressive Churches Live or Die?” speakers: Sr. Joan Chittister and L. Robert. Keck

Scripture for Pentecost Sunday A, May 11, 2008

Acts 2:1-21

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.'"