

## **Pentecost: Rivalries or Communion**

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**The Rev. Scott Walters**

One day in the fall of 1906, a scientist named Francis Galton left his home in Plymouth and headed off for the annual West of England Fat Stock and Poultry Exhibition. For years he'd been a man obsessed with two things: measuring mental and physical qualities, and breeding. Which is pretty much what livestock fairs are all about, right?

But the impressively bred specimens of fat stock and poultry were not what interested Mr. Galton most at the fair. He had an experiment he wanted to run the townspeople.

You see, Francis Galton had some ideas about people. Specifically, he thought that most of us are stupid and that any sensible society should put power into the hands of the few with the good breeding to make them wise enough to exercise it well on our behalf.

The fair would be a perfect place to test his thesis, not because he could observe mobs of people paying good money for sticks of fried butter, but because each year there was a contest to see who could guess the weight of an ox. Actually, what people placed their six pence wagers on was what the weight of the live ox at the booth would be after he'd been slaughtered and dressed.

Naturally, among the crowd were a few butchers and farmers who would have been relative experts on the matter. But most of the participants were everyday fools like you and me. So, Francis Galton gathered up the tickets after the contest was over, and averaged the 787 guesses. It would be an elegantly simple snapshot of the foolishness of a crowd.

The ox weighed 1,198 pounds after it had been slaughtered and dressed. And nobody wrote that number on their ticket. But very much to Mr. Galton's confusion and chagrin, the crowd, as a whole, guessed 1,197 pounds. There wasn't a single genius at the fair that day who came close to matching the wisdom of this crowd.

That was the first story in a book James Surowiecki wrote a few years back titled, *The Wisdom of Crowds*. And what followed were story after story about everything from collecting independent best guesses to locate a submarine lost at sea to the collective brilliance of the audience on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

The wisdom of crowds is a strange but established truth about the universe that goes against what we each seem wired to believe. It's so disruptive to think of wisdom as something collective, something shared, that none of us has much of a corner on at all, rather than something possessed by individual saints and geniuses. It's disruptive because it suggests our lives are interconnected in ways we can't comprehend. And also because it locates this wisdom, this kind of knowing, outside each one of us, rather than within us. This may be a more radical reorientation than it sounds.

I've heard the story of Pentecost from the second chapter of Acts dozens of times. And it still manages to dazzle, with the divided tongues, as of fire, resting on each of the disciples and the sound like a violent wind rushing through the house and into the people in the streets. I can't quite form a mental picture of the scene, but Luke's description of the rush and the flames do their work on our imaginations all the same.

What had never quite registered was the way the magic of Pentecost stands in such contrast to the confusion and incomprehension of pretty much every individual Jesus encountered when he tried to teach them something about his way.

This is a problem for a preacher. Because it can seem like the preaching task is to explain the mystery of God or the teachings of Jesus or the meaning of a story in the Bible like this one. But what builds up in the New Testament is the sense that even Jesus couldn't very well take the truth about God and deliver its wisdom to each of the people around him.

Occasionally what he meant and who he was would flash into clarity for a Samaritan woman at a well or some equally unlikely suspect. But the people he spent the most time with, the twelve who followed him around and soaked up his teachings and got to ask him their questions, the ones to whom he gave the charge to carry his good news into the world...these people didn't understand what was going on in Jesus even after he'd been crucified and raised. It's enough to make one wonder whether a certain kind of wisdom has ever come in individually sized packages.

But then there's the story of Pentecost. The story about how Jesus's message really did get loose in the world. And it sounds like a storm his disciples might have begged him to calm down. I might have too. Because it blows apart what I tend to think the spiritual life is all about.

Rowan Williams has said it's difficult to locate "spirituality," in the New Testament. What we do encounter is the word "spirit." And, when St. Paul famously contrasted life "in the spirit" and life "according to the flesh," he was expressing something much subtler than a squeamishness about bodies and their uncontrollable lusts and vices.

Look more closely at his letters. Living according to the flesh invariably refers to a state of self protection and hostility to others. In II Corinthians, living in the flesh is "living for ourselves," the antithesis of the way of Jesus. But life in the Spirit, as in Galatians 5, means an end to things like competition and envy. Life in the Spirit is a life of mutuality and service, of love of neighbor and even of enemies. Flesh and spirit are opposed to each other because while the flesh wants rivalry, the Spirit wants communion.

These are some of the ways Paul uses spirit and flesh in his letters. But isn't this the same spirit we see blowing through Jerusalem at Pentecost? Jews from every nation, we're told, were living in the city at the time. And the Spirit of God didn't warm up individual hearts, one at a time. It came blowing through the house where the disciples were sitting, and right on out into the city.

And what happened then? Well, all of the categories and cultures that divided people up and set them at odds, since at least the tower of Babel, didn't go away. But a miraculous understanding was made possible across and among them. "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..." all these people heard the good news in their own languages.

The flesh wants rivalry, but the spirit wants communion. Is this not what we see clearly at Pentecost?

You'll hear preachers like this one prattle on about the problem of our culture's pervasive individualism. What we don't say so often is that the problem with an obsession with the individual is that it's what sets us up for lives defined by rivalries and self protection above all else. Isn't that the world we're living in right now? And is it working, this culture built on rivalries and protection of our own? Honestly. Is it working?

A black man died under the knee of someone ostensibly charged to protect him this week. He died after allegedly using a fake \$20 bill to buy cigarettes. 20 dollars. I don't mention the news very often in sermons, because doing so usually just sends us into our familiar political corners where we crouch for self protection. But I hope that's not the case today. Because reading the story of Pentecost while Minneapolis smolders and shatters after the killing of George Floyd feels like another scriptural wake up slap to me. It matters what spirit is blowing through our lives. It matters what spirit we live by.

And it's not enough for Christians to frame tragedies like this one only in terms of individual morality. It's not even enough just to hold individuals accountable for their actions. We have to go

beyond them and beneath them. Because for the Christian, sin is never just an individual affair. Sin has to do with what we live according to as a people. And we have built a common life for centuries in America on invented rivalries, and then we have preserved them with the protection of only some of our own.

Biologists have shown us that there's more diversity in the DNA of a flock of penguins than there is in a room of black and white human beings. But we invented the notion that the amount of melanin in one person's skin made them a fraction of a person. We decided that 3/5 made them sub human enough for Christians to buy and sell them, even if they'd baptized them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Maybe even here in Calvary's font.

We created this category of other, this rival for our wealth and our worth, and then those of us with the power protected ourselves from them with property laws and economic structures and penal codes. And sometimes we protected ourselves simply by looking the other way, even after the laws had been changed. In biblical terms this is life according to the flesh to a tee. And it has led to a "corruption of the imagination" in all of us, to use a phrase by the poet Ross Gay.

Which is why we won't heal it with more and better rivalries. We won't protect ourselves from it with stronger and more violent forms of protection either. We can only heal by living by an entirely different spirit.

And if we're going to live according to the spirit of Jesus, we may first have to have to let go of this failing old obsession with the individual that our civilization has had since long before an Englishman gathered up tickets at a fair to prove how foolish the masses were, only to learn that there is still a wisdom that lives among us that is infinitely greater than what any of us can apprehend on our own.

That old story is broken. Which shouldn't be news to Christians, especially those of us living on this side of Pentecost. Because our even older story is of what the spirit of a loving, reconciling God can still do among us. Not just within me, but between and among all of us. And by *us*, I don't mean Calvary. I mean humanity. Black humans, brown humans and white ones. People from every nation under heaven are whose differences this Spirit transcended at Pentecost. And it is this Spirit's ministry of reconciliation, says St. Paul, that has been passed on now to us.

I don't know exactly what life according to this Spirit needs to look like in us right now, at Calvary, here in Memphis. But it's worth noticing that the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost was the gift of understanding. People were given the gift of hearing what people who come from other places and speak in different ways have to say about God's powerful deeds in their lives.

And so, maybe understanding people who should be incomprehensible to us will still be the sign that we're beginning to live less according to the flesh... Less as individuals who understand themselves over and against their rivals and more as a people who live by a spirit that truly wants communion among all of God's children. A Pentecostal people who won't be satisfied any longer with a life that is anything less.