



JEWS AND GREEKS, SLAVE AND FREE

June 4, 2017, The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-13; I Corinthians 12: 12-13

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Theme: The Holy Spirit coaxes us over dividing walls between people.

Come, Holy Spirit, breathe into these ancient words of Scripture. Breathe upon us that we might see farther than eyes can see, hear more than ears can hear, and imagine more than mortal minds can conceive. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

CNN just premiered a one-hour special entitled “States of Change.” It was produced by an independent reporter named Bill Weir. In the hour, Weir traces his own personal journey as the child of divorce with an atheist cop father and an evangelical mother who moved her son around the country – inner-city Milwaukee, rural northern Wisconsin, Tulsa and Texas. In the special, Weir explores a deeply divided America, what he calls “America’s new cold civil war,” asking “why neighbors seem to have become strangers.” The special probes all the divisions that are only too familiar – between Jew and Muslim, between evangelical Christians and liberal humanists, between red-state rural and blue-state urban, between Trump voters and Trump haters. I watched it online. It was a jolting hour of television.

It was supposed to run last night but was pre-empted by the London terrorist attack. That event is, of course, another hate-filled manifestation of what might be the sharpest division in our world today, that between radical Islam and the West.



One of the reasons people draw lines between themselves and others is because lines give you definition; they give you a place in the scheme of things, usually a place rather more elevated than the putative “other.” It’s a fallen human pleasure to put somebody on the other side of a line that makes them “them” and “not us.”

This is nothing new. Lines of human demarcation sliced through the world of the New Testament. In fact, it was if anything a more divided world than ours. Mile-deep chasms cut through the ancient world. There were three especially: the great divide between Jew and Gentile, the great divide between slave and free, and the natural, but then much sharper, divide between male and female. These divides defined who you were, gave you your place in society, dictated whom you married, whom you could talk to, eat with, even whom you could touch.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg describes the First Century as “*a world with sharp social boundaries between the pure and the impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, Jew and Gentile.*” It was a radically divided world, more so even than ours... And then one day it all blew up.

Fifty days after Jesus’ death and resurrection, his followers, good Jews that they still were, gathered to celebrate the old Jewish holiday of Pentecost. It started out a dispirited event. They were afraid, hiding from “them,” the hostile world out there that had crucified their Lord and might do the same to them. Into that dull Pentecost, into their “us” huddle, came something they would later name “Spirit.”

They would recall foreign languages and visions of flames. The emblematic point of the flames is passion. The symbolic point of the languages could hardly be clearer. All those languages meant that the story of Jesus was not just for the “us.” The story of God’s love is also for the great “other.” It’s for all the speakers of those weird languages – foreign ones, strange ones, impure ones, unacceptable ones on the other side of every line, all those “others” in that long, tongue-twisting list Isabella tackled so bravely: “*Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia*



and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” Talk about a sliced-up world! Makes the divided America of the CNN special seem like nothing.

In the chapters of Acts that follow the Pentecost story, we read about wave after wave of “others,” who are pulled into “us.” The Book of Acts narrates a series of ever-widening circles of inclusiveness. First, at the beginning of Chapter 8, it was Samaritans, those racially mixed, theologically deviant, superstitious half-cousins to the Jews. You weren’t supposed to eat with Samaritans; you weren’t supposed to talk to Samaritans. Yet, after Pentecost, the widening circle pulls them in. People who had always been “them” were all of a sudden “us.”

Next, it was a *real* foreigner. In the second half of Chapter Eight, just after Samaritans were welcomed in, comes a story about how Phillip, one of Jesus’ disciples, encountered an Ethiopian servant of the queen of that country. This Ethiopian was not only a foreigner, but a eunuch, a victim of a mutilation that made him not just odd, but ritually impure and ineligible to enter the Temple. Yet Philip preached the Gospel to this singularly strange and impure foreigner, who – here we go again – is baptized, and all of a sudden no longer one of “them.”

Right after that, the circle widened outward even more to pull in – of all people – a sworn enemy of “us,” a man named Saul, a radical Pharisee and enthusiastic self-appointed persecutor of Christians. Suddenly, the ultimate divide was crossed, the line separating “us” from “the enemy.” This enemy, Saul of Tarsus, soon called himself Paul. This Paul became the great “Apostle to the Gentiles,” the person who, more than any other, widened the circle to include the most vast population of “others,” that impure horde of “Gentiles, the “goyim” on the other side of the great religious divide.

Years later, this Paul would pen those dichotomy-busting verses that Isabella read from the First Letter to the church in Corinth. This guy who had once so hated “the other” writes, *“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body –*



Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the same Spirit.”

Six years ago, a remarkable man named Elias Chacour preached a sermon in this pulpit. The Sunday before he preached at Brick, I told you about him, in fact told the story I'm about to tell again. I'd met Chacour in northern Israel in a little town in Galilee called Ibillin, not far from Nazareth. The man is an incarnation of line-crossing identities. He's an Israeli citizen, an Arab and a Christian. Now retired, he was then an archbishop of the Melkite Church. Father Chacour runs a remarkable school and college in Ibillin. It's the only educational institution in the State of Israel where Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Druze students study side-by-side.

When we met, I was leading a travel group that included a number of high school students from my former church in Michigan. I'll never forget one scene during our visit. I watched as some of our lanky boys from the Midwest played an intense game of basketball with kids from Ibillin – Jewish kids, Christian kids, Muslim kids, Druze kids. I watched them throwing the ball around, calling to each other in English, Hebrew and Arabic.

Father Chacour was clear about why his school had to be this way. He had a theological reason. It had to be this way, he said, because the God he worships has no regard for human divisions. The God he worships loves Christians. The God he worships loves Muslims. The God he worships loves Jews. The God he worships loves the Druze. The God he worships loves agnostics, loves atheists, loves Arabs and Israelis and Americans. *Loves them all.*

One evening, we were talking on his rooftop overlooking the hills of the Galilee, the very hills Jesus had once walked. He told us that when people in that part of the world first meet, they often ask each other a routine question, “What were you born?” It's a big question, and you're supposed to answer, “I was born a Melkite Christian,” or “I was born a Shia,” or “an Israeli, or “a Lebanese.”



Chacour told us that when people ask him this question, he always answers the same way. He always says, “I was born a baby.” He said it on the rooftop that night: “I was born a baby,” and then he laughed and laughed, laughed till tears came. His obvious point: God loves babies; God loves all the babies, little ones and big ones like you and me, loves ‘em all, no matter what. No lines in the love of God, no “us” and “them.”

Our individual identities do matter. I’m proud to be an American, proud to be a Protestant Christian. Ethnic, racial and language identities are something to value. But none of these particular categories trump our shared humanity. We were all born babies.

Let’s be honest... This congregation we love, Brick Church, is a bit of a bubble – all English speaking, mostly white, mostly pretty wealthy, mostly well-educated. All that’s fine, no shame in it. But there’s a whole world out there, a whole world of folks who are really different from us. The Spirit of Pentecost pulled those first disciples beyond their First Century bubble. And that same Spirit of Pentecost would pull beyond our bubbles today. This can be uncomfortable, but in the end it stretches our souls.

A significant portion of the money that the Brick Church is raising in our 250th Anniversary “Campaign for Brick” will be designated for new mission outreach efforts that reach beyond the corner of Park and 91st St. Some of that money will go to more traditional grants to mission partners here in New York. But a larger portion will go to a new initiative to build a relationship with a church community that is very different from ours, a church in a neighborhood very different from ours. In busting out of the bubble, in reaching over the divide; in building relationships with people who are not exactly like us, we’ll come to know that Elias Chacour is exactly right – we were all born babies.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.