

## **Pentecost Biases** **June 5, 2022**

When I was growing up, whenever a conflict arose between my siblings and me, my parents were the agents of justice – judge and jury. After a crime had been committed, the victim would find our mom or dad.

So for example, I might run into the house and say, “Dadddd, my brother hit me!” My parents were wise enough to know that this was likely not the whole story, so my dad would say something like, “Well, why did he hit you?”

And I’d quietly respond, “Because I threw the soccer ball at his face.”

I wish, just once, I’d accuse my brother of something, and my parents wouldn’t ask any questions; they’d just punish my brother. That’s all I was looking for, which isn’t too much to ask, is it? Just an acceptance of my one-sided account and a deliverance of justice according to my own definition.

We do that, don’t we? We sometimes tell one-sided stories. And in our stories, we are the good guy, or at the very least, the innocent party, and someone else is the perpetrator or wrongdoer. This is what makes court cases hard to decipher, because the accounts told are often one-sided.

The Bible contains these one-sided accounts too. The story of the Tower of Babel is one such story. It’s a famous tale, one that maybe we know well. It’s important to note that this story is told about the enemies of the authors, written by the Israelites about their neighbors, the Babylonians.

If we keep this in mind, the story might read a bit differently than we’re used to. These Babylonian trespassers come from the East, and they say to each other, “Let us make a name for ourselves and build a tower to the heavens.” You can hear the author’s bias, almost implying, “We Babylonians know deep down that we have no pride, no name for ourselves, so we have to make one.”

And so these Babylonians have the hubris, the inflated pride, to start building a tower that stretches into the heavens. But God sees this. God knows that the world would be worse off if the Babylonians could do whatever they wanted. So God scatters these people and confuses their language. And that, according to the authors of the story, is why these silly Babylonians talk in a language that sounds like “babble, babble,” like they are babies. Those proud, terrible people got what was coming to them.

It’s a one-sided story. It serves a purpose: it explains why there are many languages in the world, and it explains why Babylonian cities have these giant temples called ziggurats that look like the bases of huge towers, but most of all, it explains why the Babylonians are not God’s chosen people (while the Israelites are). A one-sided story.

And of course, the nation of Israel in 2000 BC was not the only culture to tell one-sided stories that painted their neighbors in a bad light and portrayed themselves as the good guys. We do that with our national stories in this country. Our account of the American Revolution is different than the British version. In this part of the country, we talk about the Civil War; in other parts of our nation, it is the War of Northern Aggression.

And it continues into today's conflicts. Much of the Western world talks about the war in Ukraine or Russian's invasion of its neighbor, but in Russian state-run media, it is forbidden to use the words "war," "invasion," or "attack." We tell one-sided stories.

Simona Kralova and Sandro Vetsko, "Ukraine: Watching the war on Russian TV – a whole different story." *BBC*, March 2, 2022, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60571737](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60571737).

When we do that, we are protecting ourselves. We are delineating "us" vs. "them," good guys versus bad. Here are the boundaries. And that behavior is human nature.

But then we have Pentecost. And Pentecost messes that all up. Pentecost is that parent asking, "Why did your brother hit you?" Pentecost says, "Is that really the whole story that is being reported on the news?"

Pentecost breaks down walls. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit becomes available to everyone. We probably know the story. The disciples are gathered together, and the Holy Spirit comes to rest on each of them, looking like a flame of fire. The disciples then begin to speak in all different languages, with the help of the Spirit.

But then the kicker is that a huge crowd gathers, and everyone can understand those disciples, regardless of their home country or tongue. And we hear those nationalities (that are so fun to say): Elamites, Cappadocians, Arabs, etc. The Holy Spirit has come for all those people, not just Israelites. Not just God's chosen people. And Peter reminds the crowd of the words from the prophet Joel, that the God's spirit will be poured out on all flesh. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Then, as often happens, our reading ends but the story continues. When Peter is done talking, the people in the crowd ask, "What then should we do?" Peter answers, "Repent and be baptized." So 3,000 people are baptized, and the Holy Spirit comes to rest on them, regardless of whether they are Israelites or Babylonians, young or old, men or women, rich or poor.

Pentecost breaks down walls. The Holy Spirit comes, regardless of barriers or boundaries... continuing the work of Jesus.

That's a hard lesson to hear, if I'm being honest. We have to work to believe that God loves the soldiers of Ukraine and the soldiers of Russia.

God loves Republicans, and God loves Democrats.

God loves those who are straight, and those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.

God loves those who vehemently support the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment and those who want to see it done away with, and everyone in between.

God loves all of us who tell one-sided stories and those who give a complete account.

That's hard to really believe. But we renew our baptismal vows a couple times a year, and we promise (with God's help) to seek and serve Christ in all people, love our neighbor as ourselves, and respect the dignity of every human being. Pentecost is a beautiful day, but it also reminds us that loving beyond barriers is difficult work.

I think what it boils down to is that our role is not to be gatekeepers. We do not have the authority to say, "You deserve my love and God's love, and you do not." You deserve the Holy Spirit and you do not.

The Holy Spirit is there for everyone. God's love is for everyone. Our role is to show the world what it can look like if we really believe in the message of Pentecost. What if we really believe that borders were not boundaries or barriers? What if we believed that everyone deserved God's love?

We are not the gatekeepers. We are disciples of Jesus; we are the agents of love and welcome.

Interestingly enough, this is being played out in the national leadership of the Episcopal Church in a conversation around Communion.

It used to be that, in order to receive Communion in the Episcopal Church, you needed to be baptized and Confirmed as an Episcopalian. More recently, in the 1970s, that changed. The requirement now is only to be baptized; any baptized Christian (regardless of whether you were baptized in the Episcopal Church or in any other denomination) can receive the bread and wine. The idea is that when you are baptized, you are a full member of Christ's family.

That is still the rule today: you need to be baptized. You might know that at St. Gabriel's and at many other churches, we have gone one step further to say, Everyone is welcome to the Table. That is not the official doctrine of the church, but by my lights, that is the spirit of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is for all who seek it. Also, that is how I understand Jesus' call to drink the wine, "all of you." And when Jesus says, "This is my blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many," that word "many" could also be translated "all."

This topic of who can receive Communion is open for discussion right now, and I'm certainly curious to hear your thoughts if you have strong opinions. My understanding of Jesus' message, the events of Pentecost, and the ethos of St. Gabriel's as a place of welcome and belonging have led us to this position.

So when you watch the news next, listen to the messages that are being said and the implied messages that are left unsaid. When you explain yourself to someone, pay attention to what you say and what you leave out. We all have our biases, which is part of being human. Noticing our biases can help us appreciate the unbiased love of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit that is meant for everyone.

Amen.