

This morning is Pentecost, and is a great celebration in the church, and it is a challenging day in the church. I say it is challenging, because I believe a faithful examination of the assigned lectionary texts for Pentecost challenges some of our basic understandings about our faith.

One of the things that liberal democratic society has encouraged Christians to believe about what they believe is that what it means to be a Christian is primarily belief! It's as though all you have to do is wake up and believe a certain number of initially absurd-sounding propositions before breakfast, and you're "in."

This is a deep misunderstanding about how Christianity works. Of course, we believe that God is God and we are not and that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But Christianity is not a set of propositions — as we see this morning in the reading from Acts, it is something embedded in a community of practices that make our beliefs themselves work and give us a community by which we are shaped.

We are told that the disciples are all gathered in one place, and that something came over them, and that WHEN that happened, the disciples got up and started doing things. Religious belief is not just some kind of primitive metaphysics, but in fact it is a performance just like you'd perform Lear. What people think Christianity is, is that it's like the text of Lear, rather than the actual production of Lear. It has to be performed for you to understand what Lear is — a drama. You can read it, but unfortunately Christians so often want to make Christianity a text rather than a performance; an emotion rather than an action. And this is a mistake.

I do not believe that God calls us to admire him. He does not want our admiration. What he has taught, and what he is, requires nothing else than our lives...

Jesus refuses to let us determine our relation to him. It is not up to us to define the relationship. Only the Son of God has the authority to ask for our lives, and that is exactly what he does. When we convince ourselves that Christianity is simply a set of beliefs, the church loses the vision to make disciples for Jesus Christ. And when this happens, we stop speaking the language of one another, especially if that language is different than our own, and turn inward. And when this happens, we cease to be the church God is calling for us to be.

We sing about what a friend we have in Jesus but live as if we're friendless; and we refuse to welcome the stranger in search of a friend. We sing about leaning on the everlasting arms but feel we are about to fall apart; and we fail to hold others. We sing about being with him in the garden but live as if we're alone; and we fail to plant seeds.

If we really believe Jesus is with us and us with him, then we will be convicted to do the work of Christ, and we will be willing to find new ways to speak, new languages to use, and strangers to welcome in. We will live this way because we know we're a part of his body and his people. We can live this way because the promise of Pentecost is that he abides in us. His promise that we might abide in him and he in us assures us that we do not have to be alone.

And so each Sunday we come together in community, to worship with and for one another. We worship with one another because we cannot be Christians by ourselves. We can be students of Jesus. We can watch televangelism, but Christianity is not intelligible in a vacuum.

And we worship for one another, because at times we have to hold each other up. There are times where I'm not sure what or if I believe, but can at least believe that you believe. That is what it means to know that we can abide in him and he in us. This awareness transforms the very fellowship of the church. With his power as the vine, we the branches are joined together. We are one in his love.

William Barclay, the Scottish Bible scholar, wrote, "Love is the binding power which holds the whole Christian body together. The tendency of any body of people is sooner or later to fly apart; and love is the one bond that will hold them together in unbreakable fellowship." When we know that we're not alone, what does this mean for how we live?

For one thing, to believe we're a part of the ministry of Jesus and live in his love gives each of us a new way of living. What seemed impossible with our own limited strength and vision is now possible through his mercy and grace and the love and care of those joined with us in the body of Christ. We are called to the faith to be a part of a larger community, a family created by those who abide in Christ. Challenged together to speak the language of truth and love in the world.

But what does all this have to do with the church? First it reminds us that Christianity is not beliefs about God plus behavior. We are Christians not because of what we believe, but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus. To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding, but rather to become part of a different community with a different set of practices. THAT is the good news of Pentecost. Amen