

PENTECOST

Acts 2: 1-21; Romans 8: 22-27; John 15: 26-27;16: 4-15

May 27, 2012

Today is Pentecost, 50 days or seven weeks after Easter Sunday. It is also 50 days or 7 weeks after Passover, and the day when the Israelites celebrated the giving of the law of the Ten Commandments. That day is also also called Shavuot, and in my email this week I was offered a card to send out to my friends, wishing them a happy Shavuot. It's kind of wonderful how much one learns from spam email.

The Ten Commandments have been at the core of Judaism and important throughout history for what they say about how we should live. At the time though, we remember that the Israelites had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt, 50 days before, and the 10 Commandments offered them the rules for living on their own for the first time in many years.

Later, of course, it was the day when the eleven apostles (those that remained after Judas hanged himself) gathered to celebrate the original Pentecost and ended up receiving the Holy Spirit. And what a reception that was, wasn't it, with violent winds and tongues of fire. It is also the remarkable time when everyone became able to understand everyone else, temporarily at least, no matter what language they were speaking, as though each person had their own UN translator hardwired into their brain. And, importantly, just like the Israelites, it was the time when the followers would be left alone, to find their own way to a good and holy life and afterlife. For Jesus, after having been resurrected was now going back to be with the Father, leaving the Apostles and those who followed them with

only the ambiguous guidance of the Holy Spirit, he whom John calls The Advocate. It was, as some preachers have called it, the time when the training wheels came off the bicycle.

Speaking of training wheels, and hoping that this is not too much of a digression, some of you may have heard, as I did on the radio, that the latest thinking on bike riding is that training wheels don't help to inculcate a sense of balance, that the best way to learn to balance is to scrape your feet along the ground, until one day you pick them up for a moment or two, and then for longer and longer moments, until finally you are whizzing along on your two wheeler. Intuitively, that does seem more like the way one learns to do things, doesn't it.

But that's if you have the freedom to make your own decisions, pick up your feet when you want to. For the Israelites, all of a sudden no longer enslaved in Egypt, the Ten Commandments, delivered fifty days after their escape, provided a set of guidelines about how to live as a free people. When we think about this within the framework of political history, the Ten Commandments are a miracle of efficiency. Unlike more modern and verbose documents, it deals with spiritual, social, and legal issues all within the confines of facing tablets. Even the US constitution, considered by many to be a model of discipline, is elaborate in contrast. Yet this allowed the Israelites to understand the nature of their obligation to God, their responsibilities within their family and community, and the order of their days. It gave them the parameters of their existence and allowed them to move forward as a people now responsible for themselves.

Moving forward ourselves, a few thousand years, we arrive at gathering of Jesus and the disciples and other followers in order to commemorate the giving of the Ten Commandments. Jesus takes that moment to tell them that he will be leaving earthly reality and his followers to return to God the Father, but that in his stead, the Holy Spirit will be available to them.

Of course, the Holy Spirit is not a person like Jesus to whom one can go and ask a question, and, even if, as has sometimes been the case, the answer is elliptical, one feels that there is a recourse for life's more difficult moments. No, the Holy Spirit is not corporeal and does not manifest itself in readily understandable ways. It takes an expansion of humanity's mental facilities in a new directions to make these teachings accessible. Sometimes, it makes things awfully confusing.

Certainly the way that it is described in Acts 2 must have been confusing. There were great winds and tongues of flame resting on people's shoulders . That's confusing enough, but then the cacophony of languages to which people must have become accustomed at that time - the passage in Acts mentions 18 specific languages - suddenly becomes accessible to everyone. Instead of being within one's own private system of communication, suddenly one is thrust into the conversation of a multitude of different groups. In some ways, this might make things simpler, but in another way, everything becomes much more complicated, because one has to absorb not just the needs and wants of one's own family and community, but those all the others within shouting distance. It seems as though that would have been just about everyone within the world as it was known then. What are they saying? Why am I hearing it? What do they want? Why do they want it? What should I do about it? It's a little bit like us in the age of globalization. Sometimes, you just want to tell them to shut

up, or else close up your ears and go back to your village. Sometimes you want to say that they are just a bunch of drunks, filled with, as the Scripture says, “new wine.” But, the Holy Spirit, which has descended upon this Pentecostal gathering, is not a bartender, but rather a provider of universal understanding, and is the holy spirit of all these people, of the Galileans, the Elamites, the Cappadocians, the Romans, the Libyans and so forth. For that moment, everybody has an ability to be in the skin of everybody else, and it seems as though it is not entirely comfortable.

Now, we are told by evolutionary biologists and anthropologists that humanity’s ability to deal with abstraction can be correlated with their religious beliefs and practices. We can trace that expanding ability, we are told, through the belief in a single transcendent deity rather than a multitude of gods with specific tasks, and through the sense of a larger framework in which that deity exists. That is, God, if there is god, is increasingly thought to be not the god of one people, but of all of existence, and even perhaps the existence of what has been and what may be in the future - it is all there, all together. But that’s a pretty hard concept to grapple with, even now. Maybe it is not any easier for us than it was a couple of thousand years ago. And, if the Holy Spirit is available to all of us, are we all not likely to perceive it in different ways, understand it in the way that seems most comfortable with our personal situation, our customs and traditions? That’s why Roger Williams, one of the most ardent spokespersons for the separation of church and state, and an ardently religious man as well, declaimed about religion being a matter between one person and his (or her) god. No one and no entity or institution, not a government and not a church, had the right to compel someone to adhere to a particular doctrine.

Of course, this point of view, promulgated in the early days of the Rhode Island colony and by Thomas Jefferson and others of that ilk, does often seem today, much better known for its opponents than for its proponents.

The story of speaking in tongues has its origin way back in the Tower of Babel as many of you probably know. At one time, the people of the earth all spoke one language, goes the story, and they began to feel themselves so satisfied and so ambitious, that they desired nothing more but to build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. Then God, hearing of this, saw that their single language was only leading the people into mistaken ways and so he scattered them about and gave them many different languages. And thus, he stripped their power.

It's a very nice point about the power of communication, and certainly it must be that story to which the narrative in Acts refers when it tells us that the presence of the Holy Spirit gave people once again the ability to understand one another, each in their own language. But it does seem as though they could not hold onto it for very long. And, indeed, even today with our simultaneous translations and our interpreters, we are not able to come to agreement very often. It's more than language that is needed. It is the ability to dissolve the boundaries that separate individuals and cultures from one another so that they can make common cause and move ahead, not to build that Tower of Babel toward the sky, but to build, in the words of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation "a more just, verdant, and peaceful world."

But that's what I think and I don't know really if the Holy Spirit put that thought in my head or if it was the folks at National Public Radio.

In any case, here is what Einstein had to say on the matter:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us "Universe"; a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures, and the whole of nature in its beauty.

I am not making a case necessarily for Einstein being filled with the Holy Spirit, but I'm putting my bets on him as getting closest in our modern world to what that moment at Pentecost long ago was all about.