

Belonging, Meaning, and Purpose

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Acts 2:1-21

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In my own life, I have a pretty small sample size of experiencing what it is like to be part of the non-dominant culture. But I will share with you a few examples. When I was in a college I served as a counselor in a summer educational program and camp on the campus of Davidson College—it was a partnership with the local public schools in the area and it was focused on giving African-American students in those schools every opportunity to be exposed to a college environment and every opportunity to be prepared for college. It was also an attempt to encourage them to consider attending Davidson which was working on creating a greater sense of belonging for people of color. I was one of 5 or 6 white counselors, along with 10-12 African-American counselors, who worked with 80-100 African-American students who lived on campus for four weeks. They started when they were in 9th grade and completed the program the summer after their senior year. The program was an amazing success led by an African-American Presbyterian chaplain named Brenda Tapia, who grew up in segregated Davidson, could never have gone to school there in her own lifetime, because she was a woman as well as a person of color, and now she was a leading a program devoted to shaping a new generation of African-American students not only educationally, but also spiritually, and helping them find a sense of identity and pride and love. The success rate of students that went on to college and on to achieve success in that program was over 90% and in spite of my not being a person of color, Reverend Tapia entrusted me to oversee the program and counselors after a couple years of serving as a counselor and then invited me to teach history, African-American history, to a classroom full of African-American students. That is not necessarily a commentary on my teaching skills as much as it is on Brenda Tapia's trust, love, and belief in me. I recount all this because my participation in that program was one of the few times in my life where, at least when I was in the dorms and attending class with students and accompanying them to activities and meals, I was in the cultural minority.

There are a couple of things I remember from that experience...one is that it was exhausting to try to exist in a cross-cultural environment. Much of the music and religious and cultural norms were foreign or not as familiar to me. I was not sure whether or not I would be accepted or respected or fully welcomed. And even though I was accepted, respected and welcomed, there was still a cultural gap that still existed. And without too much trouble, I could escape to my dominant culture world. It never really hit my young immature self at the time but it has multiple times since, that that small taste I had of trying to figure out my place in that program and camp was the experience members of the non-dominant culture in our country have to a much greater extent every day. In a

small way, I had to learn how to navigate cross-culturally and to build relationships, friendships, and trust with people who looked different from me.

Years later, my family and I lived in Scotland and participated in a center city church in Edinburgh, a church we loved. It was a Sunday in November, Remembrance Sunday, which commemorated those lost in the World Wars of the 20th century, but which began after World War I to commemorate the lives lost after the armistice was signed on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour. The service of Remembrance in worship concluded with the singing of the British national anthem, God Save the Queen, in worship, an anthem that I would happily sing today as the Queen celebrates her Platinum Jubilee and amazing feat of 70 years as monarch. But singing God Save the Queen at our church, in a weird way, made me feel like a foreigner, like I didn't quite belong, and led me, I hope, to think carefully about how to faithfully appropriate an appropriate love of country in the context of the Christian community. As Brent Waters reminds us, 'there is nothing inherently wrong with a sense of national identity and belonging. Yet it can become toxic nationalism that sees all other nations as inferior...and there is nothing wrong with love of country as long as it is not predicated on the disparagement of other countries.' Waters encourages those called to live in the world as Christians to pursue a 'patriotism that is based on a love of one's own, but a love that extends out to others, rather than a nationalism that seeks to impose one's own ways on other people.'¹

What unfolds at Pentecost is not just a gathering of people speaking many languages and yet miraculously being able to understand one another, but a community made up of people of many nations, ethnicities, languages, cultures, and distinct backgrounds who are united in their common allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Spirit's vision of Christ's kingdom at work in, through, and beyond the community. Pentecost points us to a Messiah who is not captive to one culture or ethnicity or social group, but who transforms them all and creates community across the frontiers of nations, states, and other natural or historical boundaries, not removing all their distinctives and particulars, but transcending them and not identifying with any one particular culture but making his gospel heard through them all.² Theologian of Mission John Flett reminds us that 'no [one] culture is normative for the expression of the gospel,' and adds that the church often withers when it seeks to maintain a single cultural or geographical identity, whereas 'crossing cultural boundaries has been the life blood of historic Christianity.'³

The Spirit of Pentecost does not even have to work through a variety of languages. The Grassmarket Community Project in Edinburgh Scotland began over 100 years ago as pretty traditional mission and ministry with the homeless and street populace of the city,

¹ Brent Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues: Christian Ethics for Everyday Life*, 79.

² Karl Barth, *CD IV/3.2*, 741.

³ John Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, 283.

helping serve meals and provide shelter and support. But in the last fifteen years its mission has transformed to one of social enterprise, not encountering the urban poor from a place of dominance and power, help-er and help-ee, but partnering together and offering partnerships with opportunities to learn valuable skills like catering in the café or woodworking skills with reclaimed wood or textile work making tartan purses, pillows, and ipad covers that are served in the community gift shop. The minister who helped this ministry take a new transformed form explained it this way...that our society has worked out various ways to warehouse people, whether it is through government programs or providing shelter or helping serve meals, but the conviction of the Christian community is not that every human being be warehouse only, but that every human being has been put on this earth with God given gifts, and our job, our calling, our gift of the Holy Spirit, is to work hard to help every person with whom we encounter see the gifts they have been given by God and to help them put to use for their own flourishing and in service to their neighbor. It's certainly a gift to discover your own calling, purpose, and ways to serve others, but it is a special gift of the Holy Spirit to help others to see the gifts that God has given them, especially when they could not see the gifts themselves.

The church that takes form at Pentecost and that continues to take form through the work of the Spirit is a church that knows it cannot survive or thrive as a monolithic cultural church. The church that takes form at Pentecost and that continues to take form through the work of the Spirit is a church that is unafraid to cross cultural boundaries or to recognize the gospel of Jesus Christ in cultures and peoples that are not our own. The church that takes form at Pentecost and that continues to take form through the work of the Spirit is a church that thrives as it helps each person in the world it serves see their particular gifts and put those gifts to use to the glory of God and for the love of neighbor. And the church that takes form at Pentecost and that continues to take form through the work of the Spirit is a church that cares for and tends to the common good of the larger society in which it exists. Presbyterian elder and author Robert Hall wrote this past week a piece entitled 'Uvalde: Time for Brave Healers and Courageous Risk-Takers' that we are not just dealing with an epidemic of dysfunctional violence in our country at the moment, but that dysfunctional relationships and hatred toward each other [politically and culturally], kills any hope to fix the problems....contempt,' he states, 'leads to placing more value on stopping the other side than taking small constructive steps together, and so much of our response of name calling, accusing and blaming the other side only contributes to the cultural warfare.'⁴ Hall is aware that working for solutions and seeking to work with people we may oppose politically takes courage and could isolate us or even risk expulsion from our own tribes, but he concludes by saying that while every politician claims to fight for us on this or that matter, 'these times cry out for something different:

⁴ Robert Hall, 'Uvalde: Time for Brave Healers and Courageous Risk-Takers, May 28, 2022, www.robtehall.com.

the courageous healer, the brave problem-solver, the risk-taking collaborator who will fight for our kids.' We are loved by a God who crosses the boundary of his divinity to come for us, we are already part of a community that is at its best when it transcends the boundaries of culture, ethnicity, status, and political tribe, and we have an opportunity to transcend boundaries in our own time in service to Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Hall reminds us of the leadership mantra 'there's no telling what you can get done if you don't care about who gets credit,' but then he adds his own twist: 'there's no telling what hard and important things you might get done if you are willing to stop blaming the other side and look for what you can take responsibility for, what you can do on your side that just might enlist the other side.'⁵

It seems to me that a community of faith committed to the cross-cultural vision of Pentecost, a community that does not seek to remove particular distinctions, identities, or boundaries, but seeks to transcend them all in service to Jesus Christ and for the sake of the common good, a community that works for belonging, meaning, and purpose for all who are touched by its life, that is a community that is uniquely positioned in these times to try and address the particular ills and challenges we face, not as hyper partisans or culture warriors or as loyal tribalists, but first and foremost as followers of Jesus Christ baptized into a community that welcomes all cultural forms and transcends them all by the power of the Holy Spirit. May that Holy Spirit give us what we need to be the community our world needs for these times. Amen.

⁵ Robert Hall, 'Uvalde: Time for Brave Healers and Courageous Risk-Takers, May 28, 2022, www.robtehall.com.