

The Uniting Spirit
Acts 2:1-21; I Corinthians 12:3b-13
May 18, 2008

A Russian fable tells about a swan, a pike, and a crab who agreed to share the work and drag a loaded cart. The moment came for them to start. They sweated. They strained. They pulled with all their strength! But the cart stood still.

Was the load too heavy? No, indeed, for it was very light. But the swan pulled toward the clouds. The pike labored toward the river. And the crab kept backing away.

Which of them was right, which wrong, is not of concern; what matters is that the cart is still in the same exact spot!¹

The swan, pike, and crab agreed on their mission; they simply chose to execute it in different directions. Have you ever had that kind of experience with a group of people? You were united around a common goal but disagreed on implementation of the goal. It is a typical challenge in human organizations, including the church.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, Jesus gave his disciples their mission: they were to witness to the wonders of God they had seen and experienced in Jesus' life and ministry. But before they set out to the four corners of the world Jesus told them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come and empower them. They needed a force beyond themselves to energize and unite them for their mission. Today we hear the story of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit lighted upon the disciples, enabling the pilgrims in Jerusalem to understand them in their own language. Among people from 16 geographical regions listed in the account, the Spirit of God facilitates effective communication. Underneath the differences of nationality and language, a fundamental unity was enlivened among those who were present. The multitude of differences could have been divisive; however, the powerful presence of God's Holy Spirit built bridges to create community.

Pentecost is the Jewish festival praising God for the first fruits of the harvest of crops. For Christians Pentecost became a harvest of the first converts to Christianity. Later in the chapter we are told that 3,000 people were baptized into the Christian faith. This harvest gave birth to the church, the corporate body of Jesus Christ. The Spirit united and empowered the disciples. Their resources and gifts were pooled together. As a result their ministries yielded far greater potential for growth. This would not have happened had they not followed Jesus' instruction to wait for the Holy Spirit. The disciples likely would have been like the swan, pike, and crab heading north, east, south, and west with no common sense of direction.

The Spirit of God is an energy that unites. It is likened to flames of fire and gusts of wind. It is our fuel for mission and ministry. Without the Spirit, we are limp and lifeless. When powered by the Spirit, we are alive and thrive.

Oftentimes we humans become stagnant or stuck, mired in opposing opinions which hinder forward movement. It is a time to pause, as did the disciples, and wait for the presence of the Holy Spirit to nudge, prod, direct, and empower. It is a time to discern how God is at work in the situation of concern so that we might join the work of God. It is not always easy to discern God's guidance. It does not come in a text message with specific instructions. It is not broadcast via holy airwaves on the Internet. We need to stop speaking our own minds in order to listen for the mind of Christ. Oftentimes the leading of the Spirit is intuited. What is important is inviting God's Spirit into our conversation, especially when there is conflict.

The presence of the Spirit in our lives opens opportunities never imagined. "We receive gifts never dreamed. We might intuitively know how to handle a tough situation at work or at

home. That's wisdom. We might stop our angry response toward another long enough to think what it's like to be in his or her shoes. That's understanding. We might find the words of hope that get to the heart of another's dilemma, and that's counsel."

We witness "many people in all walks of life who have the gumption to persevere in difficult times. They exemplify fortitude. Some realize that for every complex problem in the world there is a simple answer – and it's wrong! They are willing to dig deeper, exhibiting the gift of knowledge. In every church community you'll likely find some truly faithful souls whose bearing shows that they radically rely on God's help and accept all of life as a gift. They show true piety."ⁱⁱⁱ

What happens when the Holy Spirit is a partner in the conversation? The crowd gathered that day listened and were surprised to find that they understood what was being said. The phenomenon of Pentecost was not speaking in tongues that could not be understood, but the very opposite. The miracle of Pentecost is understanding. Communication. Speaking, listening, hearing, and comprehending. The crowd is astonished not by a cacophony of indistinguishable voices, but by their understanding amidst the variety of voices. When the Holy Spirit enters into the conversation, a new way forward can be found. It happens on the personal level and on the corporate level.

Today it is more than language and culture which threaten to divide the church. There are differences in theology and biblical interpretation, which lead to different perspectives on social issues. It is likely that any issue about which thinking Christians disagree has important truth on each side of the debate. The key is to listen to both sides and discern ways to integrate the legitimate concerns of each side, often forging a new way forward, or at least moving forward while taking seriously the views of the other.

John Wesley was a leader who focused on the middle way, called the *via media*. The Methodist movement emerged out of the theological conflicts of previous generations. Rather than finding himself drawn to the extremes, Wesley drew from various perspectives as he articulated a gospel of the middle way. He is considered a conjunctive theologian, one who could hold seemingly opposite doctrines in a dynamic tension that actually made the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Our culture tends to split lines between liberal and conservative. The reality for most of us is that we are a bit of each. When we say that someone is liberal with their giving, most of us would want to be generous. When liberal is defined as "favoring reform," most of us can appreciate the need for change in some ways. When conservative is understood as holding on to that which is good from the past and being cautious in embracing change simply for the sake of change, many of us would consider ourselves conservative in that sense. If conservative means, as the Latin *conservare* does, guarding, keeping, or observing treasures of the past, then with regard to many things we could count ourselves conservative.ⁱⁱⁱ

When asked if we are liberal or conservative, I would venture to guess that most of us could respond "both." We embrace the best in both perspectives and forge a middle way. Finding a balance between seemingly opposed ideas can lead to a third alternative that might prevent relationships from falling apart.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit when we invite it into our conversations. When we listen to others in a spirit of Christian charity, we begin to understand the journeys of others and come to appreciate part of their perspective. We often fear that which we do not know. Hearing another's point of view helps diminish the unknown and consequently some of our fearful resistance. We may not fully agree, but we can come to an understanding.

Fans of Stephen Covey will recall that one of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is “Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood.” He shares the story of a father who said, “I can’t understand my kid. He just won’t listen to me at all.”

“Let me restate what you just said,” Covey replied. “You don’t understand your son because he won’t listen to you?”

“That’s right,” he replied.

“Let me try again,” Covey said. “You don’t understand your son because *he* won’t listen to *you*?”

“That’s what I said,” he impatiently replied.

I thought that to understand another person, *you* needed to listen to *him*,” Covey suggested.

“Oh!” the father said. There was a long pause. “Oh!” he said again, as the light began to dawn. “Oh, yeah! But I do understand him. I know what he’s going through. I went through the same thing myself. I guess what I don’t understand is why he won’t listen to me.”

Covey writes, “This man didn’t have the vaguest idea of what was really going on inside his boy’s head. He looked into this own head and thought he saw the world, including his boy.”^{iv}

Dorotheus of Gaza was a monk in the early centuries of Christianity. He suggests that we “imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the center, and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the center of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.”

When the Spirit of God is a partner in the conversation, not only are we united with God, but also with one another. The aim of the Spirit is not uniformity or homogeneity, not a world in which everyone speaks the same language or utters the same creed or embraces the same pattern of life. The aim of the Spirit, as Paul tells us, is “varieties of working, varieties of service, varieties of gifts.” The Holy Spirit bring unity amidst our variety.

Unity needs our participation. We need to listen, to seek first to understand. Understanding opens the door for the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit to blow leading us toward a new way, a way that respects all, perhaps even the way of God.

ⁱ Linda Ford, *Musings: Tales of Truth & Wisdom*

ⁱⁱ Tom McGrath, *The Christian Century*, May 6, 2008, p. 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), pp. 4-6.

^{iv} Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), pp. 239-240.

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