

Community

1 Corinthians 12:7

May 20, 2018

When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk ...

I Am

Descended from runaway slaves, guided by stars in the darkness,
Tiny like letters on a page, illegal to decipher risking graves
By violating prohibitions against reading instruction.
Like Frederick Douglass teaching forty in hiding,

They still say that we don't want to read.
While so many were caught and beaten into illiterate conformity
Still believed in the power of their words they closed their eyes and dreamed.
Of Me.

Now I am scholar, poet, professor, applying intellectual pressure upon prevailing
conceptions of reading and writing.
Igniting literate traditions beaten down by schools, criminal justice systems and urban
renewals,
So afraid of what would happen if we were to truly be educated.
Cause deep inside the pit of their denials, limited perspectives and standardized
assessment profiles, they know

We love the word.

Preaching the Word come Sunday with syncopated musical accompaniment.
Chanting the Word on Fridays with memorized Qur-an, rightly aligned in rows of devotion
Arguing the word in Saturday morning beauty parlors and barber shops
Rhyming the word with jump ropes in the double dutch rhythms and stories and voices of
little girls.
Free-styling the word in rituals of verbal dexterity, cutting contests challenging the tongue
and mind
Pounding out the word in verbal drumbeats in Saturday evening open mics and slams.
Shouting consciousness and knowledge, resistance affirmation and pain they know

We love the word.

In the beginning was the Word
Therefore I Am,
I Am that I Am
Before Abraham was born I Am
Who I Am is a function not of fact, but of faith.
Liberating me from the limitations of what I see
Spiritual instructions given on the inside
That is why I close my eyes and Be
So when I teach, I'm not conforming to constraints or categories

I'm performing hidden traditions and histories,
Potential and possibility
Exalted power of our humanity
Maybe no one else believes
But I am rooted
Yet reaching skyward
Like Redwood Trees
Confident
As the source of my ability
Is the overwhelming power of
The Word.

Shuaib "Meach" Meacham

Did you hear it? The Word? Did you hear the Word? The Word that was there from the beginning? The Word that was with God? The word that was the same as God?

Did you hear it? Did you hear the Word still speaking? Taking new shape, addressing a new context, speaking new meanings through Meach Meacham's words?

For whom does Meach speak? He speaks, first of all, for himself: "I am ... descended from runaway slaves, guided by stars in the darkness." He speaks out of his own experience as a scholar, as a literacy teacher, as a black man, as a twenty-first century black man.

But he also speaks on behalf of others, for other African-Americans like him. He speaks out of a shared culture and shared traditions and shared suffering and a shared language: "We love the word."

To whom does Meach speak? This morning he spoke to us, to those of us gathered in the sanctuary of First Congregational United Church of Christ. But who is "us?" Some of us are black, some of us are white, some of us are brown. Some of us share his experience, as a black man, as a person living amidst a majority population of a different race and some of us do not. Some of us are teachers and scholars and some of us are engineers and salespeople. Some of us are young and some of us are old. Some of us are female and some of us are male. But we are all here, here waiting to hear the Word, wanting to hear the Word.

Well, did we? Did we hear the Word? Did the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, speak to you as you listened to Meach's words? Yes? How do you know?

We know because the Spirit in us recognizes the Spirit in him. Or, better, the Spirit among us, the Spirit present here among us whenever we gather in Jesus' name, empowers us, equips us, to serve each other, to encourage each other, to challenge each other, to help each other grow more and more into the likeness of Christ.

The Spirit's presence is shown in some way on each person for the good of all.

Wow! I like that! "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all." It's a powerful sentence, a single sentence that sets the agenda for the whole church. Let's parse it, take it apart, make sure we fully understand what it means.

"The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all." What is shown? "The Spirit's presence." And what is the Spirit? The Spirit is God, the Spirit of God, God among us. God's presence is shown, God's own presence is revealed, among us.

How? How is the Spirit's presence shown? "In some way." In some way! You can't predict how. You can't predict where or when. You have to pay attention.

You have to be alert. You have to be open-minded. You never know how the Spirit may show up. In some way, which means, over time, in lots of ways, lots of different ways, maybe even in unexpected ways.

“The Spirit’s presence is shown in some way.” Where? “In each person.” Let’s make sure we get this right! The Spirit’s presence is shown in which people? In which ones of us? Which means: the Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in you!

Not all of us are pastors, but some are. Not all of us are teachers, but some are. Not all of us are healers, but some are. Not all of us are artists, but some are. Not all of us are wise counselors, but some are. But all of us are ministers. All of us are God’s servants. The Spirit’s presence, God’s presence, is shown in some way in each of us. So, tell me, who among us can we afford to ignore?

“The Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in each person.” For what purpose? “For the good of all.” The Spirit’s presence is shown in you for my sake, for the sake of all of us, and the Spirit’s presence is shown in me for your sake, for the sake of all of us. The gift in you, the presence of God’s Spirit revealed in you, is meant for us, for all of us, for our benefit, for our edification, for our delight, for our good.

For the good of all. That is the aim of the Spirit’s work: the good of all. Each of us contributes a part, for the good of the whole. Each of us plays a role, for the good of the whole. The whole, the “us,” the community. the body, the body of Christ matters. This is the work of the Spirit: to create community, to nurture community, to bless each and every one in community.

Where will you find God’s Holy Spirit? Among us. Not so much in us one by one by one, but among us, among us when we gather and worship and work and be in community.

Western Christianity, and especially American Christianity, does us a great disservice when it leads us to believe that my faith is my own, that my faith is about my salvation, about making something good of myself, about making me a better person, when it leads us to believe that my faith is personal, my business. No, no, no! Your faith is my business and my faith is your business!

Faith is personal, but not private. It is personal, because you must make it your own. You cannot know Jesus second-hand. You must meet him, learn from him, follow him yourself.

But faith is not private, not just between you and your God. Faith is between us, because following Jesus is not about what I am in isolation, but about who we are together and about how we are together. These three remain: faith and hope and love, and the greatest of these is ...?

They will know we are Christians by our love ... by our love for each other and by our love for our neighbors and by our love for the world.

Do they know? What do they see when they look at us? What do they see when they look at the church of Jesus Christ, those who call themselves by Christ's name, those who call themselves Christians?

Oh, mercy! Lord, have mercy! Lord, have mercy on us, sinners that we are! What dishonor have we brought to Jesus' name? What damage have we done to our witness to the gospel of grace? Because of our squabbling, because of our infighting, because of our judgment, because of the things we cannot let go of, that we refuse to let go of?

At our last West 4th ministers lunch meeting, Nate Nims from First United Methodist Church was telling us about the upcoming general conference of the United Methodist Church at which the "United" part of their church may itself be in jeopardy. The church is resolved to settle its stance regarding same-sex marriage and will be considering three possible outcomes.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church currently forbids pastors and churches from conducting same-gender weddings and the first option the church has is to confirm the status quo and to enforce this discipline.

The second option is to maintain church unity, remaining one church, by allowing pastors and conferences freedom to make the decision about same-sex marriages at the local level.

And the third option is to split, to become two distinct churches or two parties within one larger church. Nate compared the idea to a "National League" and "American League" of the Methodist Church.

Two churches, four churches, thousands of churches, all of us just like the rest of the world, comfortably aligning ourselves with people of like mind.

"What hill are you willing to die on?" That's how Christine Kaplunas, pastor of Unity Presbyterian Church, put the issue among us Christians. What is your red line, your line in the sand? What is it that you cannot let go of? What is it you cannot give up? What hill are you willing to die on?

But one of us already died on a hill ... for us! Jesus already died on a hill for us, so we would not have to! For the good of all. For the sake of the body. But when we are all hands over here, feet over there, ears only with other ears and eyes only with other eyes, then we break Jesus' body all over again.

The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all. The Spirit's presence is shown among us when we are "many:" people of many different ideas, many different gifts, many different traditions, many different cultures, many different races, when we many are willing to listen to each other, to learn from each other, to serve and to be served by each other, to be together, because being together, being in community, is what we are made for.

When we many are made one by a single allegiance, not to any theology, not to any "ism," not to left or right or high or low, but to Christ. We belong to Christ.

Together we belong to Christ. That is our identity and that is our agenda: to be Christ, to be Christ's body in the world. To whom do you belong?