

When the Holy Spirit meets Memorial Day

Acts 2:1-21

May 28, 2023

Pentecost Sunday

Pastor John Klawiter, Preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

The story goes that during World War II, General Patton asked his chaplain, Chief Chaplain James O'Neill, just how much praying was going on in Third Army.

The chaplain reluctantly suggested that, when there is fighting, everybody prays, but when things are quiet, the soldiers would just sit and wait for things to happen.

Patton said he was a strong believer in prayer. ***“Up to now, God has been very good to us. A lot of people back home are praying for us. But we have to pray for ourselves, too. A good soldier is not made merely by making him think and work. There is something in every soldier that goes deeper than thinking or working—it’s his guts. It’s something that he has built in there: it’s a world of truth and power that is higher than himself. Great living is not all output of thought and work. A man to have intake as well. I don’t know what you call it, but I call it prayer, or God. Prayer is power.”***

What do I notice from Patton?

He isn't insisting on everyone praying the same way. He isn't expecting everyone to have the same understanding of God.

But he is expecting his soldiers to lean into something bigger than themselves. For Patton, God very well might have been a superstition to gain an advantage on his enemies—but God, however he understood God, was clearly someone to turn to in good and bad, in praise and lament.

Patton was the general of an Army that lost many soldiers in battle, but ultimately, prevailed in victory over the axis of evil in World War II.

Patton said, “Live in the present. Whatever battle you’re facing, fight it.”

This is the spirit of the disciples during that celebration of Pentecost. It's time to live in the present.

Let me refresh your memory a bit on the significance of Pentecost.

First of all, the disciples are scared after the death of Jesus. They are not living in the present. They are living in fear.

When Jesus appears to them, he ascends to heaven on the 40th day and now, on the 50th day since the resurrection, the promise of an Advocate—the Holy Spirit, finally comes true.

Pentecost, although it feels like a Christian holy day, is actually a Jewish first-fruits of the harvest festival. Pente—fifty—is fifty days after the Passover.

It's one of three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Jews who've been spread across the world.

As this scene was acted out by Lego characters in the reading a few minutes ago (pic of Lego), it evokes an interesting reaction to me.

These visitors to Jerusalem each speak the language of their homeland. They have different customs, different understandings of God. They've probably each had different ways of seeing how God has been present or distant within their own subculture.

They may all be Jewish, but they are certainly not a united or collective people.

When they each hear their own language spoken by Peter and the disciples, they realize that something significant is happening.

Or, as one of them puts it, everyone must be filled with wine and so drunk that they're hallucinating this.

Peter boldly steps into the being the leader Jesus developed him to be—Peter, the Rock—it's time to Roll!

And he does.

He preaches and proclaims the good news to people who have longed for a Messiah, but are just now hearing about it.

These people must be surprised to hear that their own religious leaders led the charge to kill him. Yet Peter tells them Jesus didn't stay dead.

He rose from the dead and then ascended to heaven.

Upon hearing Peter's message, many of those gathered are baptized and then go back to their homes to share this good news with THEIR community of believers.

The spread of the gospel is through relationship and conversation. They were skeptical, but now, despite their differences, they're becoming one united body of Christ. Many different expressions and cultures, but a common center through Christ.

In our communities, we have different expressions and understandings of Jesus. Too often, those differences become the focus and prevent us from trusting that we are of one body of Christ.

I know this to be true in different pastoral groups and I certainly know that this is the case when talking to other chaplains.

Yet, what really matters is how we each listen and care for each other.

The fictional soccer coach, Ted Lasso, quotes what might have been Walt Whitman **"Be curious, not judgmental."**

His point is, he'd been judged his whole life by people who made assumptions about him without stopping to go beneath the surface. They'd made up their mind without exploring deeper—they lacked curiosity. Ted, demonstrated that, if they would've been curious and asked questions, they would've learned important things just by listening.

The disciples are a phenomenal example of being curious and not judgmental because they had a rabbi, a teacher, who modeled this behavior in all his interactions.

On that day of Pentecost, this massive horde of travelers to Jerusalem was very judgmental. Rightly so. Yet, because of this amazing miracle of speaking in the same language as the Galileans, their curiosity led them to stick around and learn.

They listened. It changed their lives, just like it did for the disciples.

What would happen to us if we could be more curious and less judgmental?

This Memorial Day holds a bit of a different meaning for me than in past years.

As a chaplain in the national guard, I am seeing the effects of deployment and the struggles of soldiers who have made sacrifices.

In December, I had a soldier die by self-inflicted wounds. Within a few weeks of his death, another soldier was tragically killed in a warehouse where a pallet fell on him at work.

Memorial Day for the families of Sam Bakken and Zach Fransen is much different this year than ever before. Their families didn't expect to be mourning the death of their sons at such young ages. While they didn't die in battle, both had recently deployed to the Middle East.

As the chaplain of their unit, the deaths weighed heavy on their peers. I led a session to make sure everyone else could talk about how they were doing. Soldiers had 1x1 time with a behavioral health coordinator.

Funerals were held for each in their home towns, but a time designated for memorial at drill felt important and necessary—and their families were invited to come to Camp Ripley.

On the same weekend, we gathered with Zach's family on Friday night and Sam's family on Saturday afternoon.

I led services that were attended by soldiers of many faith backgrounds. I focused on the faith of the soldiers and the promise of eternal life that they each believed in.

Knowing how valuable time spent in sharing stories over the table, I asked if there was funding for a meal within the chaplain corps.

There was not.

Undeterred, I knew that a meal needed to happen and I knew how much our congregation would support and appreciate helping in any way possible.

With the blessing of council, Faith Lutheran paid for the meals for each family and a group of friends of each soldier.

It was like a Pentecost moment to see the families hear stories about their loved ones from soldiers who'd served overseas with them. It was a unique setting—the stories that these families wouldn't have heard or known about—but could hear how much their sons meant to others. Their curiosity was fulfilled.

There was space for healing among the families, but also for the soldiers who often think they need to keep a strong face and not show any emotion.

This meal allowed for the vulnerability to talk openly and grieve collectively. Thank you, Faith Lutheran, for always leaning into generosity and compassion. You change lives with your care.

You also have blessed me and my family through your encouragement. Soon, I will experience another Pentecost moment as I head to Fort Jackson in South Carolina. Surrounded by chaplains with different faith backgrounds and theologies, I am sent—commissioned—with a spirit of curiosity, not judgment.

How about you? Are you feeling stuck or are you waiting for things to make sense?

How is the Holy Spirit calling you to be curious, not judgmental?

How is God helping create understanding and a path forward?

How does God encourage you to live in the present—and face those battles in the moment?

As Patton said, it starts with prayer—the Holy Spirit helps us get through any challenge we encounter. It's up to us to respond with grace and mercy, as Christ taught us, to show this world the gift of God's love. Amen.