

“Everything Is Holy: Our Diversity”
Acts 2:1-13

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was the Chief Rabbi in England, dedicated a large portion of his work to this question, “How do you sustain a cohesive society in the midst of unprecedented religious and ethnic diversity? Sacks offered a powerful metaphor for what could help us find harmony in the midst of our diversity: “The Home We Build Together.” This is presented as an alternative to a country home or a hotel mentality. In the country home, the host might be very gracious and might invite outsiders to come and stay but the home will always belong to the one person and so no real shared responsibility is ever developed. The hotel model, which is what seems to have been adopted at this time in the West, is where everyone is welcome to stay as long as they pay their bills and follow the rules of the hotel. They could do whatever they want in their own private room. Sacks wrote, “The only trouble is that in a hotel, no one belongs. A hotel is not a home. Which upset the people who’d been there a long time and thought they had a home. It was also disastrous for any sense of collective identity. Hotel guests don’t constitute a community. The things that matter, they do in their private rooms. Multiculturalism was supposed to make everyone feel at home but in the end it made no one feel at home. It was supposed to lead to integration, instead it led to segregation.” In the “Home We Build Together” model, Sacks offered a healthier alternative that is based on biblical principles. He noted that, “A hundred immigrants turn up in a town. The leaders of the town say, ‘Welcome. We’re so sorry we don’t have a country house or a hotel. But we do have some spare land, and lots of building materials, and some expert architects and electricians. So let’s all build you a house together.’ The natives and newcomers work together, side by side, and in the course of building, the newcomers learn the ways of the natives, and the natives benefit from the skills of the newcomers. The newcomers keep many of their old customs, but they also bring their unique gifts as contributions to the town, and they feel they belong because, with the help of the natives, they have built their own homes, which merge architecturally with the other houses in the town. The model of society as the home we build together emphasizes responsibilities more than rights. It values differences because they’re not used to keep us apart, but rather, they mean we each have something different and special to give to the common good. The town grows, because of all the new food and music and fashions the newcomers bring to the town square. And the natives still feel at home because the newcomers respect their way of doing things. That is integrated diversity.”

The image of the home of we build together resonates with me on my levels, but especially on a spiritual level. Diversity is the way God created the world and yet our needs for belonging and for control and safety drive us to fitting in and to seeing difference as a threat. We build walls, oppress or exclude, enslave and plunder, deny our own uniqueness, and degrade those who are different from us. The result

is suffering for all. As we look at what is happening between Israelis and Palestinians, we see our human failure to embrace each other and to build a common home together where all have rights and responsibilities without eliminating differences. Another example came to my mind was from the Inupiaq Presbyterian Church in Utqiavik (formerly Barrow), Alaska. When we first moved there, we thought it would be good to include some of the traditional native music into worship. We didn't realize that the native people were told by the Presbyterian missionaries that their drums were not allowed in the church because they were used for native rituals. That was a heartbreaking example of the tyranny of one culture over another.

The idea of building a home together may seem like a pie in the sky kind of endeavor, but we always have to remember what may seem impossible to us is always possible with God. One of the gifts of the story of Pentecost is that it reminds us that the power we need for building our human home together comes to us from God. It is a free gift of grace. Our work is to accept it. Pentecost was part of the Jewish faith, a festival of the Feast of First Fruits (Deuteronomy 16:9-12), which was called "Pentecost" because it came fifty days after Passover! All Jews were to gather at the Temple to make their offerings out of the abundance of their harvest and to thank God. After the offering was given at the Temple, people gathered for a meal and remembered the giving of the law at Sinai to Moses and to the people of Israel and to share what they had with the poor and oppressed.

The disciples were gathered to celebrate the feast of Pentecost, but they were still fearful. The vision of Christ for the reign of God on earth seemed like a distant dream for them due to the threat of violence they were facing. But the power of the Spirit came to their rescue just when they needed it. They received the power of the Holy Spirit in a way that filled them with the ability to expand their connection with others.

This experience of the Holy Spirit helped the followers of Jesus cross the barriers of language without eliminating the differences between cultures. They did not speak one language and everyone understood them. They spoke different languages. The Holy Spirit honored the uniqueness of each ethnic group and gave the disciples the ability to connect with those who were different from them. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to see their deep connection with all the people of the earth. It helped them to find the power within themselves to reach out to all the people so that they may reverse the hateful and dominating ways of their time. It was at that moment that they were mobilized for action to continue the mission of Jesus.

The story of Pentecost teaches us that the Holy Spirit is always leading us to greater love than the love we thought possible for us. The disciples were a small group of fearful people whose leader was executed. They were living under the

pressures and fears of their day of a society that was tribal in nature where divisions were deep and well established. But through the work of the Spirit, those old and rigid boundaries were broken, and the disciples were given a new vision of human connection and what is possible for humans together.

We have access to the same power! We can hopelessly fall into the traps of hate, division, and fear that are all around us or we can allow the Holy Spirit to blow in and through us to expand our ability to build our human home together, seeing diversity and difference as blessings. Of course, this is hard work and that is why we need a power greater than our own power.

How does this apply to us today? While many of us won't have a big flash of light or a tongue of fire fall on us to help us with our fears and struggles with differences, I know that each of us is blessed by the same Holy Spirit to find new ways to live out God's dream for harmony and love. I recently read about a new campaign launched by the Episcopal Church in our country to help people learn to connect with each other in ways that build community. The campaign's name is "From Many, One: Conversations Across Difference."

(https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/03/From-Many-One_Primer1.pdf) It is a campaign to help people listen to each other for the sake of deeper understanding. The invitation is to talk to people who are different from you by asking four simple questions:

1. What do you love? What do you value? What will you struggle to protect?
So much of human action and thinking is driven not by hate or anger but by the urge to protect what we love. By asking and sharing our answers to 'what do you love,' each of us has a chance to name and to hear what matters most to us and why. It's harder to argue when we start from what we love.
2. What keeps you up at night? What has been lost in your community? What do you miss?
People across the spectrum understand the experience of loss: the loss of money, jobs, status, national identity, cultural identity, a sense of security, a sense that they matter, etc. By asking and sharing our answers to 'what have you lost,' we become curious about what each of us has lost, what we're grieving, and perhaps what we're trying hard to get back.
3. Where does it hurt? Where have you been wounded by life? What makes you angry? How or where do you feel that pain and anger?
Regardless of our race, gender, age, ballot choice, earnings, or location, we all know what it is to hurt. By asking and sharing our answers to 'where does it hurt,' we become curious about how each of us has been wounded by life, by others, and by social forces, instead of assuming 'others' are fine and only I or my group is hurting. We offer up our experiences and learn to offer one another compassion.

4. What do you dream? What do you hope for the future for yourself, your family, your community, and your nation?

We all dream of a better world, as we imagine it from our own personal perspective, but we don't get to hear or share that vision very often. Instead, people often assume that their own ideal picture of life, community, and society is shared by everyone or that certain others can't possibly want the same kind of future they do. By asking 'what do you dream,' we become open to hear and share each other's dreams for our families, communities, society, and ourselves.

You can use these questions around any topic. Imagine the power of such conversations around difficult issues. It will take time, but this kind of engagement with others will bring deep understanding and connection. Imagine if instead of arguing with someone about the merits of vaccines, gun control/rights, or of one political party that you take the time to ask the four questions about such topics.

We will end with a Pentecost mediation prayer:

Meditation: With your inner eye, envision the person or community who most bring joy to you by their presence in your life.

Prayer: Spirit of joy, through you Christ lives in us, and we in Christ.

Meditation: Now picture one person who has taught you most about the power of love, and sense the fullness of your gratitude to her/him.

Prayer: Spirit of love, you bind us in love to yourself and to those around us. In marriage, and partnership, in family and friendship we live out your love.

Meditation: Allow all your senses to be open to the presence of the community surrounding you- seen and unseen, those living and those who have gone on ahead of us.

Prayer: Spirit of the body of Christ, you unite us into a community of faith through your lifegiving grace and hope.

Meditation: Now, in silence, imagine and invoke the disparate peoples of the earth, especially those who struggle against oppression and be aware of them as being your own flesh and blood.

Prayer: Spirit in the world, you comfort us and draw us into closer relationship with one another.

Meditation: Finally, focus your mind's eye on a candle flame. See it first located in your heart, then surrounding you. Watch as the flame dances and leaps, as an unseen breeze swirls around it, and be aware that the flame and the wind are the presence of God's love.

Prayer: As the flame rises free with light and warmth, we receive the gift of life. As the wind moves and dances round the earth, we receive the gracious gift of the spirit. Amen.