

Pentecost Sunday  
May 31, 2009

To this day it remains an ugly and painful word. It is so abrasive, most especially to Native Americans, that I hesitate saying it out loud, especially on this glorious day when we celebrate our one year anniversary in this sacred space. So let me apologize in advance to my Navajo friends for allowing this word to resonate within the sanctity of this sanctuary this morning. The word is...assimilation.

That is the term the United States government used at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe how Western Europeans should relate to the Native populations of America. We should...assimilate them. As all of you here are painfully aware, the government program of assimilation was created to strip indigenous people of all aspects of their culture. This was done initially by taking an inherently nomadic people and forcing them to stay in one place called a reservation. In 1887, Congress did this by passing the General Allotment Act, which was set up to “civilize” Indians by making them stay in one place and be farmers. This was followed up by making every outward aspect of Native culture illegal, from religious practices, to dances, to dress, to even speaking in a Native tongue. Next, the assimilation program was aimed at changing children from the inside out. Indian kids were removed from their own homes and taken to boarding schools, where they were taught to eat, walk, sleep, dress and talk like Anglo kids. I don’t have to tell each of you how disastrous assimilation was for Navajos and all Native cultures. It created a generation of people who were totally alienated from their Native roots and people, whose substandard education also left them

disconnected from the predominant culture. Its effects continue to haunt us today.

Assimilation may have been the official policy of the United States government beginning in the late 1800's. But it actually began way before that. No sooner had the Spaniards arrived in Western America in the 1700's, that they began building the California missions and started telling Natives that their understanding of God and the world was juvenile and heretical. The only way to worship the real God, the monks arrogantly explained, was to do it the way they did it. They then proceeded to take away every aspect of Native culture from the people, attempting to turn the indigenous people of California, New Mexico and Texas into dark skinned Europeans.

The government has since apologized for the whole assimilation fiasco and the damage it continues to do to people to this day. But the truth of the matter is that while we don't use that loaded word anymore, the thought process behind it remains a central thesis in how the predominant culture of this country attempts to relate to everyone else. Most recently, we have seen it in the attempt to make English the "official language" of the land. We saw that ballot measure in Arizona as recently as the election before last. Though the wording is often couched in different ways, the basic idea is that if you are going to be an American, you need to let go of your cultural roots and be like the controlling culture. You need to stop talking and acting like an Italian or an Iraqi or a Chinese or a Mexican or even a Native American, and you need to start doing things...like "us."

This thought process permeates nearly all aspects of our society. But I would argue that it may be most prevalent in our churches. It seems that the entire concept of

church in America has become to gather people of similar cultural backgrounds and belief structures so that they can all worship together in the same fashion that makes them comfortable. I will never forget the first time I delivered the Gospel in Spanish in a predominantly English speaking church. I received two reactions. First, the Hispanic people started crying. They later told me it was the first time they had felt like they were “home” since they left their country of origin. Second, a group of Anglos came to me and said, what do you think you are doing? “Those people need to adapt to our way,” they said. Dr. King’s famous line about Sunday morning being the most segregated time in America still rings so true.

Where pray tell, does this worldview originate? Why is it that we continue to believe that the way to create a harmonious society or church, is to make everyone think, talk and act the same way? This morning, I would like to suggest to you that the roots of this way of thinking actually comes from our sacred text. I believe that people see a single universal language and a single universal culture as an ideal because they believe that our Bible states as much. It all begins back in Genesis, when we hear all those early stories of how people keep messing up. The fourth story in those accounts is the one about the Tower of Babel. You remember that story, right? A bunch of guys (it’s always guys messing up of course), become so arrogant that they believe they are so much more than just humans. They believe themselves, in fact, to be gods. They will prove it, they say, by building a tower that reaches up to heaven itself. God wants to teach them a lesson, so what does God do? That’s right. He has all of them start speaking different languages so that they cannot converse with one

another and work together to build the tower.

The story seems to suggest that there was once a natural state of humanity when everyone spoke the same language and was the same culture. If we are going to fix things, it sounds like what this story is teaching us is that we need to fix Babel, that is, we need to take the cultures of the world and make them all one again. With such an interpretation, assimilation becomes a form of purification, a way to bring the world back to the good old days before God punished us by separating us into different people.

While all that sounds logical enough, there is a minor problem here. The problem is today. The problem is Pentecost. We have just heard a story about thousands of people gathering in Jerusalem for a major feast day, the spring harvest festival. Those people, Luke tells us, come from all over the known world. He very specifically describes just how different they are from one another, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappadocians, Egyptians and on and on and on. But these very different folk have the most amazing experience. Simultaneously, they all experience God with them, the presence of the Holy Spirit right there. Suddenly, all of them feel God's presence and they are all linked to each other in a way even they do not understand. It is the very essence of the kingdom of God happening on earth in a single flash. And what is that experience like? Do all of the people gathered immediately become Romans or Greeks? Does the skin of the black Africans there suddenly turn olive to create one Middle Eastern culture? No, what we hear is that they each speaks in their own Native tongue, but that everyone understands each other anyway. Despite their

cultural differences, they all come together as one and worship and celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit as one. Not only is there no assimilation going on here, but rather the exact opposite. God apparently does not want to eliminate cultural diversity, but rather embrace it and use it as a gift. God's answer to the Tower of Babel is not a universal language or culture, but rather Pentecost, a world of different people with different languages, different experiences, different understandings of life, and different ways to understand God. They all come together, not despite their differences, but because of them. The dream of Pentecost is a world not where we are all the same, but where we relish and enjoy and grow as a result of our diversity and difference.

That is what Pentecost does for us. The Spirit of God creates a situation where many different kinds of people can come together and understand one another even though we have experienced the world very differently. Pentecost is about creating a world not just where Navajos, Anglos, Hispanics, and Africans come together, but also where Republicans and Democrats meet, where rich folk gather with the destitute, where those brought up Russian Orthodox can blend with Latter Day Saints, where PhD degree holders can have intimate conversations with those who have not had the opportunity to go to grade school. That is what is going on in today's reading from Acts when people begin to understand one another, though they are very different from one another.

That is why St. David's is first and foremost a Pentecostal church. No, you would rarely hear someone speaking in tongues here, but that also is the opposite of Pentecost. At the Pentecost event, everyone understands each other, though they are

speaking different languages. Today when people speak in tongues, no one understands anyone. That is not Pentecost, it is Babel. Pentecost is all about understanding the other and bringing together people of difference, and that is the heart and soul of the St. David's experience.

That is why it could not have been any better if we had planned that our first service in this sanctuary would be on the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost may rank third on the hierarchical totem pole of Christian celebrations, but here at St. David's, it is the top of the heap. For us, it is more than the story of the beginning of Christianity and the birthday of the church. It is more than a story of flames and wind and the presence of the Holy Spirit when the disciples so desperately needed her. It is even more than the story of how Christianity would spread to all corners of the globe. Pentecost is more than all of that to us, because it is personal. Pentecost is OUR story. It is virtually word for word the story of each of you. That's why it is more important to us than even Easter and Christmas.

Your community of St. David's was founded on the desire to live into the diversity and richness of the Pentecostal event. We have done our utmost to create a community where everyone is not only welcomed, but are valued for the differences they bring here. We have worked hard to create a church that is the opposite of the assimilation model, a place where we all happily and emphatically state our opinions and embrace our cultural backgrounds. We do so knowing that the person sitting next to us may be completely disagree with everything we say and stand for, and then they will love us anyway.

We were told that such a vision was beyond utopian. They told us that it was ridiculous to believe that Cretans and Arabs, Jehovah Witnesses and Catholics, rich folk and poor could experience the Holy Spirit together. They told us that church was supposed to be about like minded people coming together to defend themselves against the sinful culture surrounding us.

Instead of shrinking from these attacks, all of you were emboldened, responding that no, we aren't drunk at all, but we are filled with the spirit. We have been empowered to avoid Babel and instead proclaim Pentecost. And just like those first days of the church, we too grew exponentially, not as a church of sameness, but rather one where people came from every faith and background and tradition. We would become the universal church envisioned by Jesus and brought about by the Holy Spirit, right here in Page America.

We honor the Pentecostal roots of St. David's on the front cover of our service bulletin each week, noting that "We are one in the Spirit". And in the tradition of those early Christians who formed our church on this very day of Pentecost, we have spread the Gospel far beyond Page, as people all over the country have learned about us. If ever there was a church formed in the image of that first Pentecost, you are it.

But perhaps what is most important for us to remember on the Christian church's birthday and our own birthday is just that. We, like the Christian church on that first Pentecost, have just been born. That first experience of the Holy Spirit was not a once for all time event that people nostalgically recalled as the culmination of their faith experience. No, it was only the beginning. It was the first spark that ignited the spread

of the Holy Spirit to all corners of the globe.

Our Pentecost was also just the beginning. Now, with the gift of this incredible sacred space, we have the opportunity to bring Pentecost to so many more people. How shall we do it? How shall we create a church, a social ministry and a worship experience that so honors difference, diversity and cultural distinctness that everyone will want to experience it? How do we get better at replicating the Pentecost experience so well that the whole world will want to be here? And how do we spread the word that the days of assimilation and universal conformity are long gone?

How will we do it and what will give us the courage to go out and bring that Pentecost vision to others? It is Pentecost itself, the power of what happens when we come together and realize that what our bulletin says is true. We are one in the Spirit.

Happy Pentecost. Happy Birthday. Happy Anniversary. Let us go forth and celebrate this glorious world of diversity that allows each of us to come together with our very different gifts and our very different ideas to form the Body of Christ. Let us work together to create a church and a world that never again allows assimilation of any kind and instead celebrates and honors our differences. Let us let go of Babel forever and embrace Pentecost in all we say and do. Amen.