

Lydia Neufeld Harder, June 8, 2014

“Being Church: Celebrating the Connections”

Pentecost Sunday, Picnic Sunday

I am not sure how often the Sunday school picnic and Pentecost Sunday happen on the same day. What this does is create a unique opportunity to bring the celebration that we do at our picnic together with the celebration that the larger church does every year at Pentecost—a celebration of the birth of the church through the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Though, Pentecost has taken a back seat in our society to various long weekend holidays, my own thoughts this week have moved in the direction of church celebrations. And so I wondered: what exactly are we celebrating today?

I have memories of both SS picnics and of Pentecost from my childhood. The SS picnics highlighted various kinds of races and games in a park near Niagara River. And of course, ice cream cones! Pentecost highlighted baptism, a rather solemn occasion when girls in white dresses and boys in white shirts formed a circle at the front of the church and were sprinkled with water. In the afternoon there was the celebration of communion, a celebration highlighting the covenant that had been made that morning.

So what do these two have in common? Or do they have anything in common?

In our family June birthdays are special because there are so many of them. There are 5 in our immediate family beginning with Gary this past week and ending with our daughter Kristen’s birthday on the 29th. What is noteworthy about birthday celebrations is that none of us who celebrate a birthday have to work hard to deserve the celebration. The very fact that we were born or adopted into a family makes us worthy of being celebrated. Birthdays are not the time to speak about the many things that persons have accomplished. Nor do we bring up the things that have created problems for us in the past year. On good birthdays celebrations, we are celebrated just for being who we are! And for the deep family connection that motivates us all to come together, to eat together and to just enjoy each other’s company. Birthdays are celebrations of pure grace, of undeserved love!

It seems to me that this is the first and most important similarity between celebrating the birthday of the church and a SS picnic. Both are celebrations of

connections between people that do not depend on mere accomplishments but rather depend on deeper connections, something that motivates us all to come together with our children, to eat together and to just enjoy each other's company! Conflicts are forgotten for one day, the darker side of the church in its history is set aside and we celebrate the birthday of the church together. We celebrate both Pentecost and our SS because we are here-- present to each other-- in this time, at this place, with this particular group of people through the grace of God working among us!

The connections that came about on that first Pentecost were not the natural connections of family or even friendship. In fact, what is noteworthy about the story of the birth of the church is that new connections were forged that were not all that natural. The story makes much of the fact that people from different parts of the world suddenly began to hear about God's work of power in their own languages. Acts mentions 14 different groupings that now heard the good news in their own mother tongue. These different languages symbolize other differences that normally would keep these people in their own groupings, differences such as cultural background, generational differences, even gender differences. But the coming of the Spirit exploded the barriers of communication so that something new could emerge: a community that worshipped and shared and ate together as the church of Jesus Christ.

The backdrop to this story is an ancient story told in Genesis 11. It is a story about the beginnings when all people in the world spoke the same language. And as they began to see the possibilities of what they could do together they said to one another: "Come let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth". They were ready to accomplish great things because they were united. Speaking one language symbolized the many similarities that they shared. But somehow God wasn't pleased with this suggestion. God scattered them abroad by confusing their language so that they did not understand each other's speech. "And the people were scattered over the whole face of the earth. And the place was called Babel because God had confused their language."

This story told to many generations of people over the ages suggests that unity can go wrong, that just because people understand each other *because they are so similar*, does not yet mean that God is pleased with them. In fact, in this story, God is distinctly displeased and does something about it. God scatters the people! God put differences into place so that people would not use their unity for self-centred purposes.

The Acts story is almost the mirror image of the Babel story. Here there are great differences but unity emerges as they begin to hear each other speaking each in their own mother tongue. A scattered community becomes one through the work of the Spirit of God in creating a common understanding despite the differences among them.

Both stories suggest that God is at work, one in creating differences when unity has gone wrong and the other in creating unity when differences have gone wrong.

This has given me a great deal to think about this week as I reflected on how God works in the world sometimes creating differences among us and sometimes creating unity out of these differences. Is it really the same God who worked in the story of Babel and in the story of Pentecost?

When I read John's sermon from last week, I noted that he gave you quite a history lesson. Maybe we can also look at the history of the larger church through the particular lens that I have been using so that we can see God working in a new way. If we study the longer history of the church we can note times when the church was unified, but it had built its own kingdom, forgetting the kind of kingdom that Jesus had initiated. For example, the church in its alliance with the state created the Holy Roman Empire, an empire that dominated and oppressed many while building up many monuments for its own fame!

But then reforming movements began to bring disunity to the church and the result was a scattering, a dividing of the empire into many different groups. The Reformation is perhaps the primary example of the dividing of an unhealthy church into many different denominations. Much violence occurred during this time while persons were working out their own convictions. We ask: Was God at work in this scattering?

In this post-Christendom world, in which we find ourselves, Christians are often in a minority, but scattered in a variety of denominations. Perhaps we too are recognizing that we had begun to build our own little kingdoms and need to find reconciliation with each other. The recent discussions between Lutherans and Mennonites and between Catholics and Mennonites demonstrate an openness to finding a new unity. Apologies have been made for the persecutions of the past and new dialogues have begun in an attempt to understand each other and learn from each other. Is God active in creating a new unity through these dialogues?

As we reflect on the history of this small fellowship, MFM, we too can ask: Where was God in the story of MFM? Can we see God working even as a unity that may not have had spiritual depth was destroyed by bringing differences to bear on it? Or alternatively do we see God working to create a deeper unity by building new connections out of our differences that go way beyond ordinary and natural connections?

A number of weeks ago, Gary asked the adult SS class to name the dividers and the connectors here at MFM. What is it that connects us to each other? What divides us from each other? The history of MFM suggests that there have always been many differences among the group worshipping together. Some of these differences were theological, some were cultural, some were generational and some were just plain personality differences. However, there have also been connectors throughout the history of this community. Some of these were theological, some were cultural, some were generational and some were personality differences . The same factors sometimes enriched the group and sometimes created divisiveness within the community. How is God using these very human characteristics to help us mature as a congregation?

The Babel story suggests that if the desire in our connectedness with each other is to build a community only for our own needs, one that will guarantee a continued existence for our particular project, a project that will suit our particular alliances, then God may need to find a way to bring differences to bear on it. But if our differences begin to separate us so that some are excluded and some are included , some have a great deal of power and some feel powerless, then God will need to enter our community with his Spirit and bring about a new unity not centred on ourselves and our own personal desires but on our openness to God's leading and God's Spirit.

When unity emerges out of differences and even conflict, it is always a miracle, just as the birth of that first community of Christians was a miracle! For it is always a miracle when a community becomes a worshipping community, one used by God to embody the gospel message of love and compassion, despite the many different ways in which we as humans break connections with each other, the many ways in which we sin in our relationships. And as a community begins to embody God's kingdom instead of its own, it discovers that it is already in mission in a particular place at a particular time. Its eyes are opened to see God working through the differences, even through the conflicts-- for God can turn even these struggles into sources of new insight and new understandings and reconciled relationships.

I have become convinced that God is active, even when conflicts blind our eyes so we cannot see how God is trying to lead us into deeper paths. Allow me one story from my own experience.

When we left TUMC, I was invited to share in the customary exit interview that is led by the MCEC conference pastor just before we left our congregation, a congregation that had seen a lot of conflict in recent years. Some very hurtful things had been said and done. We had been blamed for some of the conflict, me for the way I led the adult SS classes and Gary for the way he led the congregation during that stressful time. But some time had passed, some reconciliation had happened, and we were slowly building a new and deeper connection with each other despite our different viewpoints on a number of issues. And now we were leaving this congregation with whom we had struggled over the years, but with whom we also had celebrated over the years and whom we loved dearly. At this exit interview, where a representative group from the congregation gathered with the conference pastor, we were asked one significant question. “When were you as a congregation and Gary and Lydia in their leadership capacities at your best during the past 20 years that they have been with you?”

I remember our surprise and perhaps even shock when after some silence, one person responded: “I am surprised to hear myself say this, but I think we were at our best, and Gary and Lydia’s leadership was at its best, at the point of our greatest conflict. We studied scripture the most, we became most honest with each other, we took off our masks and we began to seek God’s face together in a more intensive way than ever before. In our time of greatest conflict, we all needed to turn to God for direction.”

Around the table people who held different positions on the most contentious issue nodded their heads in agreement, adding their comments as to how they had experienced God in the conflict. I felt God’s grace pouring over us in that holy moment when together we recognized that God had been present in the scattering that had taken place but also in the gathering.

I remember that moment every time I read the welcoming statement that is in every Sunday morning bulletin in that church. I celebrate God’s grace in bringing the variety of people into our midst creating great differences and even conflicts among us. I also celebrate the deeper connection between congregational members that came about as we struggled with each other. The statement goes like this:

This congregation welcomes people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts. Although we don't always agree with each other we share a belief in Christ and a desire to be his followers. We invite you to journey with us as we strive to live with integrity and to be a just and faithful Christian community.

Today we here at MFM are celebrating the birthday of the larger church created through the work of God's Spirit—the church of Jesus Christ. This is not just any kind of community, but rather a community that worships the God whose love was embodied in Jesus and whose love and compassion embraces the whole world. We celebrate the way God works among us bringing people into our midst that challenge our false unities but also the way God uses us in our human failures to bring us into deeper communion with each other.

Today we particularly celebrate that persons from many parts of the world have gathered here with us today--young and old, male and female, rich and poor to worship together and to picnic together. God's Spirit has been active among us! Pentecost and SS picnics have much in common. Both celebrate the connections that God has created among us. Both are evidences of God's grace active in our midst. Let us join in the celebration!