

7 Easter YB 2024

Remember When...
By the Rev. Salying Wong

We've been in the Book of Acts since Easter. After the resurrection, we replace the Old Testament reading with readings from the Book of Acts to tell the story of the gathering of the church. At Pentecost [unroll dove], the Spirit pushed the Jerusalem church out, out and out. [Swing dove]--The Spirit says, "Go Deacon Philip to Samaria; yes, I know you're supposed to hate them; go to the Ethiopian eunuch; yes I know their effeminate voice makes you uneasy. Go Peter to the gentiles; yes, I know they don't eat kosher; go to Cornelius' home; yes, I know you've never been in a gentile home. Go Lydia, Priscillia, Barnabas, Timothy; yes, I know you're women, you're young, and you're not of the Twelve. Go to the ends of the earth. I, the Spirit, will personally go to Saul. I've got to knock him off his high-horse. I've got big plans for him. Meanwhile, everyone, keep going! Proclaim the love of God for all people, regardless of nation, gender, and class. Join with those whom God loves on the edges of belonging and make a new belonging. Go, go, go to the ends of earth."

And then we get to the seventh Sunday in Easter, and the lectionary says, "Pull it back, pull it back!" What?! I was just getting warmed up. And yet, the lectionary does have its wisdom. You can go and go and go and lose God in the work, lose the purpose in the pursuit, lose the center at the edges. We pull back to go forward in a better way.

Today, we're back at the beginning of Acts. We're back before the Pentecost moment. [Roll up dove and put it away.] Don't worry, we'll pull this out again next Sunday. But, this Sunday, we are given an opportunity to contemplate what we unconsciously take with us when we go to the ends of the earth. This Sunday, we place ourselves in that early Christian community and ask, "Remember when...?"

So, remember right after the ascension of Jesus, how we rubbed our necks from the crick of staring up in the sky, watching Jesus disappear? And right before the Holy Spirit descended upon those gathered with tongues of fire at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem? Remember how Peter looked at everyone looking at him? He hadn't the faintest clue what to do next. So, he decided to repeat the past. He thought our first order of business was to replace Judas. God, he went on and on about how Judas was the betrayer. He spoke with relish about how Judas' guts exploded and was pecked by vultures. We were all thinking it, right? "Hey, Peter, Judas wasn't the only one who betrayed Jesus. What about the matter of the cock-crowing?" But, you know Peter and his shocking lack of self-awareness. He made us replace Judas with Matthias and went on and on about how important it was to have Twelve. Twelve apostles for the Twelve tribes of Israel for the 12X10 people gathered that day—and how every Episcopal church ought to have twelve members of vestry. Remember how after all that work to restore the twelve, it didn't really matter. The Spirit moved us on so fast from Jerusalem. She continued to use Peter and John, but the other 10, they were never heard from again. The Spirit put some deacons, not apostles, at center stage, Stephen and Philip; and she sent the women, too. Not only that, She chose Paul, who never even knew the historical Jesus. What did we learn? We learned that if we insisted on the old structure, we would have gotten in the way of the Spirit.

That was our pre-pentecostal mind. Our minds weren't yet subjected to the fires that burn away our preconceptions of what must be before God is God.

But even after Pentecost, we were still being purified of the worldly ways. Remember when, after we started living in community, we thought we were doing such a good job, saying we were a community of equal sharing and giving. But, remember that we only thought that was true because we were the ones who didn't go hungry and just wanted to believe that everyone else was fine? That's when we heard about it from the Hellenists, the Jews from the Greek speaking regions of the diaspora. They burst our bubble and told us we were still treating them like Pentecost didn't happen—that we

were making a distinction between them and the Hebrew speaking Jews. We were astonished by their criticism. We thought we were so generous. But, they were right. We deluded ourselves about our generosity because we kept the lion's share for ourselves. But, let us give thanks to God that we were able to admit that we were only partially converted to the reality of Pentecost. We still needed much prayer and study to be what the Spirit intended us to be: a people without distinction of nation or tongue or class.

Remember when we put the sign outside the house church that read, "All are Welcome?" Remember how Annais and Sapphira joined us. You don't remember? Yes, the lectionary likes to edit this scene from public reading because it makes us uneasy.

So, this is the story. Annais and Sapphira were husband and wife. When they joined the church, they announced that they had a plot of land and that they would sell it and give it all to the church. But, they conspired with each other to keep part of the proceeds back. They lied to the church saying, "We're giving you the whole thing!" Peter knew they were lying and said, "Look, this land was yours and you didn't have to give it to the church. And even when you sold it, you didn't have to give it to the church. It belonged to you. But, now you come to our community to use your money to signal to everyone your false virtue. You are trying to bend this community for your hero project. These acts that you claim are noble are deadly for the community and for you." And they both dropped dead in the midst of the congregation.

What did we learn about God's intentions for the community? We learned that no one member is more important than the whole. The Spirit takes the joining of people very seriously. The joining is for all people to know God as their one true hope and salvation. Nobody, no one leader's, no oligarch of 12 apostles, no hero servant, no one ministry is the center. Maybe instead of putting in our bulletins, "No matter where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here," we ought to write, "All are welcome to leave behind your hero projects and build community solely to glorify God."

There's lots to remember and to contemplate on this Sunday, including how God showed Peter not make a distinction between Gentile and Jew, how God showed Philip not to show distinction between sexual categories and holiness, how God showed us that we still carry our worldly junk with us. We must study how we are still invested in the worldly categories of wealth, power, nation, race, family, esteem, and security. So, when we move forward again, we know we must always submit ourselves to internal conversion if we are to really build the kind of community that the Spirit intends. The ends of the earth, where the Spirit is sending us, is not just a geographical realm; it is the human heart. Let us remember this before we go forward again.

Abstract: On the Sunday before Pentecost this year, the lectionary pulls us back to the beginning of the Book of Acts. It's a bit jolting since we've been racing ahead in Eastertide in Acts to "the ends of the earth." But, pulling back has its wisdom. On this Sunday, we reflect on the mistakes the early community made and how it learned. We, too, can learn as we reflect on what it means to build a God-centered community. We pull back to move forward in a better way.