

“Never Bullied”

Acts 2:1-21

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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On Pentecost the Church was born! This ancient Jewish festival explodes with the power of the Holy Spirit, lighting on the disciples with fire and the rush of mighty wind. This Holy Spirit—God’s presence with us—guides, strengthens and comforts us.

And never bullies.

This is obvious. A God of love doesn’t bully. Bullying—defined as threatening, intimidating or embarrassing others in a game of “power over”—are antithetical to one another. Love, divine and human, has at its heart the reclamation and redemption of us and others. God doesn’t bully.

This is obvious. Except when it’s not. In some Christian communities God’s judgment too quickly becomes human condemnation. God’s expectations too quickly blur into human expectations in the name of God. God’s commands that give life become confused with human demands that distort the full life promised in the Holy Spirit.

The late Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz was Professor of Christian Ethics and Theology at Drew University, my alma mater. She observes this about the Pentecost story:

The community of Jesus’ followers centered on inviting and including, not rejecting and excluding. Would there be any doubt that today that...filled with the Holy Spirit, we are to open our hearts to African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics and Euro-Americans? As followers of Jesus we welcome unruly teenagers, fragile elderly persons, those with mental or physical challenges, those in love with persons of their own sex or the opposite sex. We may exclude no one.

Upper Room Disciplines, May 9-15, 2005

This community that arises from the power of the Spirit, that welcomes all, is relevant not only to the more recent emphasis on bullying among children and youth. It is also relevant to the Christian who said to me *“My old boss was laid off and I had to begin interfacing with her boss. My old boss always kept me away from her boss, and now that I have to interact with them I know why. She yells. She intimidates. She humiliates. I don’t understand why some people act that way. It certainly doesn’t make me more productive.”*

Lisa Belkin wrote an article, *“Working for a Boss Who Bullies”* in the New York Times (Sunday, May 8, 2005). One of the stories she told was this one sent in by a woman who works in hospital administration:

I had taken a one-day vacation in order to visit my uncle who was dying of lung cancer and placed in a hospice program. I received a call on my cell from the director, screaming and yelling at me as I stood by my uncle’s deathbed. She completely forgot that she approved my time off.

Her supervisor, the woman said, was too afraid of the director to explain.

Does this mean there is no room for passion, whether in the workplace or the community of faith? Of course not! Surely it was a passionate moment when the Holy Spirit came on the disciples, causing all present to speak in their own language and yet with the universal understanding of all. This is the difference, you see: language and passion that promotes understanding, consensus, discernment; rather than intimidation and castigation.

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entitled Leaving Church. In her sermon “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit” she makes observe that the Holy Spirit “*can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us, but as far as I can tell the Holy Spirit never bullies us. We are always free to choose whether and how we will respond.*” (Home by Another Way, p. 142)

That freedom, on this Pentecost Sunday and every Sunday, give us the opportunity to discover God anew. One of the reasons I love the diversity of the Church is that it helps me examine and re-examine my own faith. The blessings and recognitions today—of UMARMY volunteers, secular and sacred study, and Christian commitment through church membership—remind me that I am on a journey. They challenge me to reexamine answers I have held for a short time or a long time.

In fact, I experience greater authenticity among Christian believers who see themselves as seekers of truth rather than possessors of truth. They embody a curiosity for holy mysteries that is life-giving rather than life-inhibiting. Remember today’s story? The seekers in Acts wondered “What does this mean?” The know-it-alls sneered, incorrectly, “They are drunk.”

Let’s be honest. Spiritual inquiry is sometimes work. Work we don’t want to do. Sometimes we just want to get our “church fix” and go home. Especially the day after the Fair on the Green. And from time to time that’s okay, just like from time to time we need unstructured time and time to rest and time to breathe.

But when we consistently rest and do not think, probe, stretch and grow, we end up with atrophied roots that will not support faith in stormy days. Today and last week folks joined the Church, confessing faith in Christ. It didn’t happen in a vacuum. It happened because parents and teachers and peers cared about their spiritual formation; prayed with them; read the Bible and spoke at home of the spiritual and ethical applications of faith; studied and served. Without these influences church membership becomes, as John Wesley once said, “*the form of religion without the power.*”

But with these influences we become open to the Pentecost vision of “young people seeing visions and old people dreaming dreams.” A new chapter of dreaming and visioning big for God’s yearning in our lives.

And if we dream boldly and fail, what then? The English Victorian poet Robert Browning said it well: “*Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?*” Peter knew something about failing, didn’t he? Remembering his denial of Jesus but now inspired by the Holy Spirit and a fresh start, he told those on that first Pentecost: *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” Everyone.

Dr. Billy Graham has been consistently listed as one of the most admired and trusted men in America. His evangelistic organization spread the message of Christ to millions of people. His interface with civil rights, politics and foreign affairs is much more nuanced than is commonly understood; and Graham himself struggled with faith in his early years, once being excluded from a church youth group because he was “too worldly.”

At the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade that launched his public evangelistic ministry, a fellow evangelist criticized him for setting the church back 100 years. Graham answered, “*If that is the case, I failed; because I intended to set it back 1,900 years to the book of Acts, when the followers of Christ were accused of turning the Roman Empire upside down.*”

Let us be open to the Spirit that sets the church back, now over 2,000 years, to the presence of the Living Christ and his vision for a new community where no one is excluded, no one is bullied; but all are welcome.