

## Draw the Circle Wide

*A sermon by the Rev. Daniel Simons  
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

PENTECOST : MAY 28, 2023

ACTS 2:1-21 | PSALM 104:25-35, 37 | 1 CORINTHIANS 12:3B-13 | JOHN 20:19-23

*In the name of the Risen One, whose Spirit is wind and fire, and whose name is Love.  
Amen.*

As I was flying back from England through Edinburgh last week, I heard something that I had never heard before in an airport. So as the as the announcer was calling out the flights for all over the place, they were most often speaking in a foreign language to start out with: Spanish, French, and I think it was Hindi, and some other languages I couldn't identify, and then the English translation followed it.

And at first that just felt odd, in a British context, to be hearing those languages spoken in Edinburgh. But then I thought, "Well, of course, it's the people (where English is not their first language and everything is in English) that need that information the most, and they need it in their own language." And I started to look around me and just inhabit that experience differently: noticing where people were from and imagining what that experience was like for them - to be traveling through an English sign-posted everything space.

And I wonder if that is what God is doing in that first Pentecost moment. I wonder that just because of how the story is written. So the very center of it, you know, these disciples are in the upper room, they're trying to figure out what comes next, waiting for it, and suddenly they are just overcome with this drunken, giddy, "We've got to go tell someone. We've got to do - say something" and on into the street. And as they speak, people are hearing their own accent, their own language, and they say, "How is it that these, you know, Galileans. (Galilean is a code for those country hicks, the ones we know don't speak a second language.) How is it that they are... that we hear each in our own native language? What does this mean?"

That really was the driving question that Jesus' followers were working on and we're still working on: "What does this mean? What are we doing? What do we think we're doing?" And baked in at its core, at its very center, is this clear word if we can hear it: that God is doing what God always does - the only thing God can do. We're discovering it in a new way: that good news comes to us in our own tongue, in our own idiom, in our own accent - each one of us is the center, the full center, of God's loving attention.

This is not a new thought. It's been there from the beginning. A thousand years ago, the 12th century Franciscan theologian Bonaventure said that "God is the One whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Sit with that, "Whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Which means there is no "outside the circle" for God.

And it also means, to us, that there is no one person or one group that can claim the center to the exclusion of any other person or group. And that makes it really relevant for our time because we are still in the middle of the Culture Wars. (Maybe they've just heated up since the eighties.) Where we're kind of freaking out about it: "Who's at the center? Who gets the privilege? Who, what, how does... what does that even mean? Can there be more than one center? What happens if your center's not my center?" And we're discovering and seeing that some who have been used to being at the center (so much so that they may have not even noticed it) are becoming really displaced, dis-eased, uncomfortable as that center moves, or as others say, "Well, wait, what about them? What about us?"

That disruption can be really disorienting, and we are in one of those moments right now. But that disruption where we go from seeing ourselves as the center to imagining the impossible thing - that someone else is also the center - that is the Pentecostal moment. Suddenly something shifts, and everything is different.

So last Saturday, my friend and coworker, Matt Heyd, was elected the next bishop of the Diocese of New York at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Huge, largest cathedral in the world place filled with music in this kind of over the top, "raise the roof" way that only the cathedral does. It was this very classic liturgy at its biggest and grandest, and it was shot through with some really surprising moments. I watched this on YouTube later, by the way, that's how I know. You can watch it too, I'll put the link in the Wednesday weekly email.

So the first lesson was read in Mandarin and the second was read in Creole - without translation. Sure, it was in the leaflet, but just listen. And the Gospel was read in Spanish, and even though I didn't understand the words, I had that same airport experience of saying, "There's some congregation of this diocese that *does* understand it, and that is hearing it in their own accent, and that matters - that they matter enough to be heard in this huge space, to be centered in that way."

And then there was the music: Wow, again, it was this big classic Anglican stuff. It was wonderful and it was just electrifyingly fresh with all these recombinations. So the Litany of Ordination is usually just chanted, somberly - it was done in a kind of Caribbean beat - a woman had composed something fresh for the event, just riveting. And for the Psalm, it was a classic Gregorian chant, but there was an Eastern Orthodox drone laid underneath it, and then a Hebrew cantor from the synagogue chanted in Hebrew over the top of everything, and it was arresting. The old had become new.

And knowing Matt, he was centering these voices and styles and mixing it up very intentionally to say, "This is how God acts with us, always and everywhere." The old becomes new, and it always surprises, and God is speaking to each of us in our own accent.

So while that was going on in New York, I was here where Father Nicholas, 30th Rector of St. Paul's, was celebrating 50 years of ordination and 30 years as an Episcopal priest, another wonderfully grand event. And the center of that - the theme of that was, unmistakably, Radical Welcome: that everyone is welcome at the table no matter who, no matter what. And that embrace, God's embrace, changes everything. And from Rector 30 to Rector 31, that is a claim that we continue to make above all.

And we're not making it up or taking a different tack than Jesus took. This is just trying to be faithful to Jesus, who hung out with all the wrong people. That was his sign of how God is: that God is always drawing the circle wider than we can imagine.

Now notice what that does to our hospitality - it changes it completely. We can never really say, "We welcome you to join us." Because that just keeps us at the center. It's generous, but it's still not as big as God's invitation - God is welcoming everybody commonly. So that's what I try to always remember to say at the time of communion, "Jesus welcomes everyone without exception, and so we welcome everyone, and everyone by name." So we are just doing what Jesus did and letting that change us, that is the real miracle of this. I will never forget and keep quoting to myself, Stephanie Spellers, when she visited us a couple of years ago saying, "For welcome to be truly radical, we have to be prepared for the person we welcome in the door to change us - to knock us off our center and hear what new thing God is inviting us into."

It's wonderfully exciting and scary at the same time. And ironically, I think the best way we can hold onto that core value of Radical Welcome is to let it go - and I don't mean abandon it or ignore it, but rather not try to control what it means and what it looks like. To let ourselves be decentered enough to find a new center in God. To realize that, if I give up what makes me comfortable, it's probably going to allow someone else to feel that comfort they may not have felt, to hear God's voice in their own accent.

Today we are baptizing another member of the church into this one spirit and one body that is ever-changing. Young Elliot, brought by his parents, Alex and Eve, who have been coming for weeks and months now. And Elliot is being put in the center of the circle for a moment. You'll see it, in a minute, as we recognize something that has been true eternally. There's no magic that happens here except that our eyes are open. And it's not just to say, "Oh, Elliot too! Huh." (He's easy to think is the apple of God's eye - he's adorable.) But the point is that "Oh wait. That includes every one of us." Every time we do a baptism, it's everybody's baptism all over again, which is why we renew our baptismal vows to say, "Oh, that's right. I am the center of God's loving regard... and so is she, and so are they, and so is he." And that, itself, is one of the ways God draws the circle wider and wider still.

So, practice time.

In the next two minutes, in our sermon silence, I want you to simply think of three people, three people who are at the center of God's loving attention. First is somebody who you love dearly. The second is somebody whose name you know, or who you kind of have a neutral relationship with, and the third is somebody you really don't like. *[Laughter.]* Okay. That probably came to mind right away.

And then come back to yourself, and just see for a moment as God looks at them. Just try this out. It's a little risky, but it can be fun. Look at them with God's eyes. Just let that divine regard see that one, then move to the next, move to the next, and come back to yourself.

In this moment, God is drawing the circle wide and wider still, and this will keep happening, until the end of time. And all we are doing is saying yes and becoming more. And the spirit blows through the world, changing all things for good and for God.

Amen.