

Congregational Church of Pinehurst  
United Church of Christ  
September 27, 2015  
Pentecost18B

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29  
Mark 9:38-50

May the Day Come!

Many years ago there was a wise rabbi who asked his students,  
“How do we *know* when night has ended  
and day has begun?”

The students gathered around the fire that night  
pondered the question in silence for a bit.

Then one of them spoke up and said,  
“When I can distinguish *my* field  
from the field of my neighbor.”

The rabbi smiled.

“A good answer but not the one that I would give.”  
There was more silence.

Another student spoke up,  
“When I look in the distance  
and can tell the difference  
between a sheep dog and the sheep.”

The rabbi smiled again and shook his head.

Then a great discussion broke out among the students.

“What about when you can tell the difference  
between the mist and the clouds?”

“Between your house and your neighbor’s house?”

On and on the students went  
until the rabbi’s face grew sober.

Finally he lifted up his hand and cried out,  
“Stop! Do you see what you are doing?  
You are dividing the world between this and that,  
between what is yours and what is not yours,  
between neighbors and strangers!”

“You are dividing our broken, fragmented world  
into even **more** pieces,” said the rabbi.

The students grew silent,  
and one of them asked with a puzzled expression,  
“Tell us then Teacher, how **do** we know  
when night has ended and day has begun?”  
When you **stop** dividing then you will be able  
to look into the eyes of another human being.  
When you see there another brother or a sister,  
you will know day has come.  
If you cannot see a brother or a sister,  
it will always be night.

Long, long ago, a young leader of Israel  
approached Moses with a concern.  
Along with 69 other leaders of Israel,  
this young man had just been blessed by Moses  
and filled with the Spirit of God,  
so that they could help Moses with the overwhelming burden  
of caring for God’s people in the wilderness.  
So far so good.

Until one day this young man observed two other men  
prophesying inside the campground.  
His concern was not that they were doing something **wrong**,  
but that they were doing it without proper authorization.  
**This** young man had been given the authority to help,  
but these guys had not.

A little jealousy perhaps?  
Moses’ young assistant Joshua jumps in  
and adds to the drama.

“Stop them immediately, Moses!”

But Moses has different ideas when he shouts....

“Would that all God’s people were prophets,  
and that God would put God’s Spirit upon them all!”

Sounds a lot like the story of night and day.

When you stop dividing then you will be able  
to look into the eyes of another human being.

When you see there another brother or a sister,  
you will know day has come.

Long, long ago, Jesus’ young disciple John

came running frantically to Jesus with alarming news.

“Teacher, we saw someone doing something good,  
casting out demons in your name,  
but he wasn’t part of our group.”

And Jesus said,

“John, let him be, whoever isn’t against us is for us!”  
Doing good in my name is doing good---  
whether they have **our** group credentials or not.  
Can we not rejoice in that?!”

Sounds a lot like the story of night and day.

When you stop dividing then you’ll be able  
to look into the eyes of another human being.

When you see there another brother or a sister,  
you will know the day has come.

Next Sunday we will celebrate World Communion Sunday.

This observance was begun

by the Presbyterian Church in 1939,  
and represented a significant shift in understanding  
where the Spirit of God resides.

During the previous century,

as the United States began to ascend  
as an economic and political power,  
we joined the Europeans

in seeking to extend our influence in the world.  
Expanding our territory  
through economic and military might  
across to the western seaboard---  
And then into far-flung places  
like the Philippines and Hawaii.  
The political doctrine of “Manifest Destiny”  
sought to cover our desire to increase our power  
with a benevolent veneer of ideology  
which claimed that white European culture  
was superior to others.  
And, as a result, we had been given a special role by God  
to spread our ideals (and our economy)  
throughout the world.

And in collusion with our government,  
the Christian churches of the United States  
offered a parallel theology to prop up our aspirations  
which suggested that we white Christians,  
enlightened by scripture,  
possessed the true understanding of God,  
and that the native peoples  
of North America and South America, Africa and Asia,  
did **not** know the true God  
and practiced spiritual forms that were inferior to ours.  
Therefore, we justified sending teams of missionaries  
to foreign lands in order to convert the “heathens”.  
Sometimes in our benevolent ignorance,  
and sometimes in our mis-guided arrogance,  
we assumed that God was not in those places,  
despite that fact that there was evidence of reverence  
for the earth and for each other,  
and for the Great Spirit of Life in those places---  
sometimes in even greater measure  
than we evidenced ourselves.

But thank God, by 1939 the Church had finally begun to recognize that the people of other lands had innate spiritual gifts, just as we did.

And World Communion Sunday was an attempt to recognize in some formal way that at least the **Christians** in other lands were the sisters and brothers of the Christians in our land.

It was the overt expression of a dawning inner awareness that Christianity had global partners all over the world, and that American Christians even had a lot that we could **learn** and **receive** from Christians in other places. Other Christians had gifts and resources to give us, and we could grow in **our** faith through relationships with our Christian neighbors around the world.

Setting aside a special Communion Sunday to reflect on what is true every time we come to this Table, World Communion Sunday has been an important symbol of our expanding understanding and embrace of neighbor.

But I wonder---I wonder if the time has not come to expand the Table even further.

As I listened this week to politicians arguing over whether a Muslim was qualified to be president of our nation, and as I continue to hear people around me paint all Muslims with the same brush, and talking as if Islam and ISIS were the same entity, I find myself wanting to say, "Enough!".  
"Enough already!"

And I find myself seeing in these stories we've heard today,  
an invitation to see the Spirit of God alive  
in spiritual people and spiritual communities  
outside my own.

And as a Jesus-follower and as a Christian pastor,  
I feel compelled to be clear about the mis-truths  
constantly being used to smear whole groups of  
faithful people trying to do good  
from the context of their own spiritual tradition.

It's true that most biblical scholars  
think that in today's gospel story,  
the author called Mark was addressing  
a dispute within the early Christian community  
about who had the most authority to proclaim  
the message of the kin-dom of God----  
the Jerusalem-based followers of Jesus,  
or the Gallilean-based followers of Jesus.

But I whole-heartedly agree with scholar and preacher David Lose  
When he writes that,

*....two thousand years later, after inquisitions and pogroms  
and the Holocaust and Northern Ireland  
and the Balkans and 9/11*

*and the religious outrage and violence of recent days.....*

*After all of this, can we not also imagine*

*that Jesus calls us to be at peace*

*with those who name God differently*

*or are not able to name God at all?*

*Can we not imagine that Jesus would have us*

*not only tolerate those of other faith traditions*

*but also seek their welfare?*

*Can we not imagine Jesus calling us to understand them,*

*love them, and in all these ways*

*"be at peace with one another"?<sup>1</sup>*

And I would add, when will we get it that, as Jesus said,  
“those who are not against us are for us”?

When will we get it that people of goodwill  
who are doing good in the world---  
whether they are Christian or Muslim or Jewish or Hindu  
or Buddhist or atheist---

people of good will who are doing good in the world  
are ultimately walking the same Way of salvation  
and transformation that Jesus walked.

They too, are on the Way of justice and love  
and peace and reconciliation that Jesus embodied.  
They, too, are sisters and brothers of righteousness.  
They may not worship the same way, or at all.  
They may not claim the same stories as scripture.  
They may not practice the same rituals.

But if they are healing the diseased,  
And loving the marginalized,  
And seeking justice for the oppressed,  
And making Truth more evident in the world,  
and offering a path of forgiveness and reconciliation,  
when Truth has been ignored---  
then they are on the same Transformative Path  
that Jesus invites us all to walk together.

So let us stop the Muslim-bashing and the Jewish jokes,  
and the western suspicion of everything eastern.  
Let us stop dividing our broken, fragmented world  
into even **more** pieces,” as the rabbi said.  
For when we **stop** dividing then we will be able  
to look into the eyes of another human being.  
And when we truly see there before us,  
another sister or brother,  
we will know that the night has passed  
and the day of salvation has finally come.

May it come quickly!  
Namaste! Amen.  
Rev. Brent A. Bissette

<sup>1</sup>David Lose from his blog *Dear Working Preacher*,  
“Insiders and Outsiders”, September 23, 2012.