

# DICHOTOMY NO MORE<sup>1</sup>

May 30, 2021

The Day of Pentecost

I Corinthians 12: 12-13; Acts 2: 1-13

First Presbyterian Church

## 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

<sup>12</sup>For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

## Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

## Sermon

As most of you know, I was not always a Presbyterian. It was in my early 20’s that I “saw the proverbial light” and joined a little Presbyterian congregation in the inner-city of Atlanta. I have to say the Presbyterian Church has been a great fit for me (as I know it has been for many of you who are former Southern Baptists) ... but I ALSO have to say that at first it took some getting used to. I mean, reading liturgy and prayers from a bulletin? What’s that all about? But even more strange for me is the way we Presbyterians govern ourselves... how we make important decisions about our life together. Take the presbytery, for example. Presbyterians don’t have bishops... so commissioners from churches meet as a mini parliament to make decisions. It is a consummately democratic process; and often consummately frustrating.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is adapted from Rev. Michael Lindvall’s “The Great Nochotomy,” preached to Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, June 12, 2011.

I remember one meeting in which it took three hours of parliamentary procedure to refer one single motion to a sub-committee for further study... for further study! I'll spare you the details, but as we labored through motions and substitute motions, amendments and amendments to amendments, people quoting Roberts Rules of Order like it was Scripture, narrow votes on this and that... in the midst of all that... suddenly THE OBVIOUS struck me like lightning. At every turn... with every vote... the choice was either "yea" or "nay," "up" or "down," "for" or "against." In other words, I realized that our parliamentary procedure treats reality as if all were radically dichotomous – as if all were either "this" or "that."

Of course, the theory is that through this back and forth... this "amend it here," "refer it there" process, the motion is gradually "perfected Similar to Hegel's philosophical scheme where first there's a thesis... and then you get its opposite, called the antithesis, and out of the push and pull between thesis and antithesis, there arises a synthesis that then becomes the new thesis as you gradually press ever closer to truth. It's a good theory... and it often works... but as some of you know, it sure can make for a tedious presbytery meeting.

The fact is, we love dichotomies. Dichotomies are neat and orderly. "Listen to me son, there are just two kinds of people in the world..." And the fact is it WOULD be much easier if it's all just "this or that." But it's NOT THAT EASY, and I'm convinced that our "dichotomizing" is fundamentally a very misleading way to understand the world... and especially when we do it to other people... dichotomizing gets downright deadly.

Our world is full of "people dichotomies" ... with "us" and "them." The West and the East... the global north and the global south... the developed world and the underdeveloped world... the Christian world and Muslim world... the Sunnis and Shiites... the Protestant and Catholics... on and on. Of course, these are real distinctions, but too often they become dangerous when they invite "US" to make "THEM" into the great "OTHER" – into beings somehow who are not as real or valuable as "us."

And it's not just at the macro level that we do this. Just think back to your high school self... whatever generation it was... What were the groups? For me it was the "jocks" and the "preppies" and the "brains" ... and (this will date me) the "hippies." I'll leave it to you to guess where I fit. And of course, for us today there is: liberal, conservative... Republican, Democrat... Black, white... woke and not woke. How we do love our dichotomies!

This is nothing new, of course. As people of the book, we see it in the world of the New Testament... which was, if anything, an even more segregated and divided world than ours. There were three main dichotomies: the great dichotomy between Jew and Gentile... the great dichotomy between slave and free... and then the natural dichotomy between male and female. These dichotomies defined who you were... they gave you your place in society, they dictated whom you married - even whom you could talk to and touch.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg describes the First Century as "a world with sharp social boundaries between the pure and the impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, Jew and Gentile." It was a radically dichotomized world, more so even than ours.

And then one day... (it happened to be fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection) then one day it all blew up.

His followers, good Jews that they were, had all gathered to celebrate the old Jewish holiday of Pentecost. It started out a depressing day. They were afraid... they were hiding from "them" – meaning the hostile world out there that had crucified their Lord and might do the same to them. Yet, into that dispirited Pentecost... into their "us" huddle, comes something they would later name "Spirit." They would recall speaking in foreign languages and having visions of flames. The flames were symbols for passion... and all those languages meant that THE STORY of Jesus is not just for the "US," but also for the great "OTHER" - the speakers of all those weird languages – the foreign ones, strange ones, impure, unacceptable ones the ones on the other side of every dichotomy.

SO TAKEN were they with this power they named Spirit that they begin telling the story to everybody... and I mean EVERYBODY! And in no time, all the wrong people are crossing the line and joining up. We see it in the next several chapters of Acts, as wave after wave of "others" who become "us," a series of ever-widening circles of inclusiveness that see the old dichotomies shattered.

First, it was Samaritans – those racially mixed... heretical... superstitious half-cousins to the Jews. You weren't supposed to eat with Samaritans; you weren't supposed to talk to Samaritans. They were people who you turned away from, people you crossed the street to avoid. Yet, after Pentecost, these people who had always been "them" were all of a sudden "us."

Next, it was REAL foreigners. In chapter eight of the Book of Acts, just after Samaritans were welcomed in, comes a story about how the disciple Phillip met an Ethiopian – a servant of the queen of that country. As it turns out, THIS Ethiopian also happened to be a eunuch – a victim of a mutilation that made him not just odd, but ritually impure and ineligible to enter the Temple. Still, Philip preached the Gospel to this strange and impure foreigner (who... here we go again) is baptized... and suddenly no longer one of "them."

Right after that, the circle widened outward EVEN MORE to pull in (of ALL PEOPLE) a sworn enemy of "us" – a radical Pharisee and enthusiastic persecutor of Christians: a man named Saul. And suddenly, the ultimate dichotomy separating "us" from "the great enemy was crossed." This enemy, Saul of Tarsus, soon called himself Paul... and it is this Paul who became the great "Apostle to the Gentiles" - the one, more than any other, who widened the circle to include from the previously UNIMAGINABLE Gentiles on the other side of the great religious dichotomy. And, years later, this Paul would write those dichotomy-busting verses we read from the First Letter to the church in Corinth. This man who had once so hated "the other" wrote, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the same Spirit." "One body," "the same spirit..." radical stuff.

As you all know, the Holy Land has been in the news again spotlighting what has to be one of the most intractable "us and them" conflicts in our world today. Having traveled to Israel several times, I think a lot about the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians... and this week as I pondered this story of Pentecost – really the MIRACLE of Pentecost –

I remembered a story Michael Lindvall told in one of his sermons about meeting Father Elias Chacour. Before retiring, Father Chacour was the archbishop of the Catholic Melkite Church in Palestine... but most important, he is an Israeli citizen... an Arab... and a Christian. In other words, his identity defies dichotomies. Lindvall met him in northern Israel in a little town in Galilee called Ibilim, not that far from Nazareth, where Father Chacour founded a remarkable school. Having seen the lack of educational opportunities for Arab youth beyond the 8th grade, he set about creating a school that was open to all local children, regardless of religious affiliation. So, in the early 1980s on an empty hillside now known as the Mount of Light, a classroom building was begun to house the high school... and since then, the school has expanded to include a kindergarten, primary school, and gifted program that now enrolls over 3,000 students, ages 3 through 18. It's the only educational institution in the entire State of Israel where Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Druze students' study and play side-by-side. Father Chacour was clear about why his school had to be this way... and as you might guess, it was a theological reason. It had to be this way, he said, because the God he worships has no regard for dichotomies. The God he worships loves Christians. The God he worships loves Muslims. The God he worships loves Jews. The God he worships loves the Druze. The God he worships loves them all!

Two weeks ago, yesterday, Yigal Yehoshua died after being pelted with rocks thrown by Arabs in his hometown of Lod. He was 56. Yigal was an Israeli Jew... and Lod is one of the "mixed cities" inside Israel that you have heard about on the news where groups of Arabs and Jews fought each other in the streets, torched cars, and businesses, and savagely beat anyone from the other side who crossed their path. Yigal Yehoshua was one of those people. Yet, after days and nights of war and ugliness, there was a rare moment of hope... when Randa Aweis, a 58-year-old ARAB mother of six, received one of Yehoshua's kidneys after a 10-year wait on the list. He was a registered organ donor... and the Jewish man and the Arab woman were medically a match. Hmmm.<sup>2</sup>

One evening, Pastor Lindvall and Father Chacour were talking on his rooftop overlooking the hills of the Galilee, the very hills Jesus had once walked. Chacour told him that when people in that part of the world first meet, they often ask each other a routine question, "What were you born?" It's a loaded question, and you're supposed to answer, "I was born a Melkite Christian," or "I was born a Shia," or "an Israeli, or "a Lebanese." Chacour told him that when people ask him this question, he always answers the same way. He always says, "I was born a baby." And he laughs and laughs.<sup>3</sup> His obvious point: God loves babies; God loves all the babies, little ones and big ones like you and me. Which means there are absolutely no dichotomies in the love of God... no "us" and "them" ... no "inside" and "outside." And the promise of Pentecost... (as hard as it might be for us to believe and even harder for us to see)... is that this dichotomy-shattering power we have come to call Holy Spirit is still at work... making possible far more than we can even imagine... in the Spirit of Jesus, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male and female are able to listen to each other, and hear each other, and love each other... for we were all made to drink of one Spirit. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaac Sharf, Arab Woman Gets Kidney from Jewish Man Killed in Riot, Religion News Service, May 25, 2021

<sup>3</sup> This is a well-known story that has been repeated in many publications.