

Action and Belief

David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, recently wrote a lengthy article about the disconnect between what we believe and how we act.

The focus of his article was on the revelations that the Southern Baptist Conference covered up matters of sexual abuse for many years by people who were in leadership positions throughout that denomination.

We have seen, sadly, similar things occurring in just about every Christian denomination, not to mention in various revered organizations, like the Boy Scouts.

The central question Mr. Brooks asks is, "why the disconnect between what we say we believe and how we act?"

How is it possible for people who, week in and week out, purport to preach the gospel of love, repentance, and humility, to then bully, deny, and cover-up grotesque sins?

These are the questions that Pentecost raises for us today.

Because the whole point and purpose of Pentecost is to connect "what we believe" to "how we act."

It is the great unifying moment for all of us.

Expressed in languages that everyone can understand.

Expressed through people from every tribe and nation — gathering together to hear and embrace the same truth.

It's the reversal of what happened at Babel.

Babel is all about disconnection.

Disconnection because their goal with their tower to the sky, is to be like God.

Disconnected from the intimate, yet subordinate relationship with God that is humanity's rightful place.

Disconnection, whose mother is pride.

Whereas Pentecost is all about connection.

And the mother of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit.

We are in the midst of profound disconnection in our country.

We have been for quite some time now.

There's the refusal of those with power to welcome the historically disenfranchised to the table of power.

The fear of those who have never had power, metastasizing into anger and hatred against those perceived to be different.

Now more than ever, the connection that Pentecost offers is something that our world sorely needs.

So how do we do it?

How do we connect what we say we believe to how we actually act in this world?

That is the great challenge to people of faith, especially today.

And it begins by developing a profound willingness to search ourselves.

To candidly acknowledge that we are each and everyone of us prone to idol worship.

The question for humanity is never **whether** we shall worship — but only what or whom shall we worship?

And don't be fooled into thinking that idols are carved stones or other physical objects.

No, the truly dangerous idols tend to be things like money, power and fame.

We are prone to self-deception.

Rationalization and justification of all kinds of nonsense is second nature to every human being.

No exceptions.

We are prone to self-preservation.

Say what we will about caring for others, we are hardwired to protect ourselves first.

And all of these tendencies in human nature are tendencies that blind us to defects of character that end up justifying unjustifiable behavior — while we so easily condemn the very same behaviors in others.

On a broader scale, take those same tendencies and apply them to our tribe, our community, and our nation.

That old bumper sticker from the 1960s, "America, Love it or Leave It," is a symptom of this blindness.

It's ironic that we claim to have a Judeo-Christian heritage, and yet, as a nation, we have so roundly rejected that heritage.

Whether it's folks on the left of the political spectrum who embrace an atheistic secularism that focuses all energy on the mistaken notion that this life is all there is — or folks on the right who dress up in the Judeo-Christian heritage, but then soil it with flags, guns and bigotry.

None of this is new to humanity.

What is new to humanity, all these thousands of years later, is setting out on that journey of transformation that Abraham was first called to.

That Moses and the freed slaves of Israel embarked upon.

That the prophets reminded the people about.

And that finally, in Jesus, God's own self takes on human flesh to show us just how it is to be done.

That "showing" is set out in today's gospel, when Jesus says: "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

Let's sit with that for just a moment.

Let's plug that crucial sentence into our human proclivity for idol worship, self-deception and self-preservation.

Because it's from these that we take this all important sentence from Jesus and twist it into a magical ticket.

A ticket to get me what I think I want, instead of putting me on a path to get me to where I need to go.

And so, Prosperity Gospel folks hear that line from Jesus and start lining up for airplane tickets, bigger homes and money in the bank.

After all, doesn't Jesus say, "ask in my name and it's yours?"

But if we embark on the road of transformation, what we come to see is that to "ask in the name of Jesus" is to ask AS Jesus asks.

And Jesus never asks for himself.

Jesus never worships idols.

And therefore Jesus is never self-deceived, because his eye is always on the face of the God who serves, loves, forgives.

Jesus is never concerned with self-preservation.

The opposite is true.

Always and everywhere he lays down his life for you and for me.

He lays down his life for the whole world.

To ask in his name means to ask **as he asks**.

That the impetus for every request, is the good of others.

With eyes fixed firmly on the God who serves, loves, forgives.

So much of the divisiveness in our nation is wrapped up in idol worship, self-deception and self-preservation.

The cult of personality that enthralls so many, which is based on dehumanizing those who are different, first Mexican immigrants, now transgender kids, is loaded with idol worship, self-deception and self-preservation.

Pentecost calls us to a different way.

At Pentecost, in Christ, all of our categories are shattered – so that lo and behold – the marvelous diversity of humanity – created and blessed and adored by God – can sparkle as the apple of God's eye.

All of which leads to the most astounding truth of all, that the unity that binds everything on earth – is the same unity which binds heaven to earth.

The spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, are all united – in Christ.

“Through Christ, the temple of God IS humanity!

So that each ounce of matter belongs to God – and is fulfilled in God.

Each instant of time – is God's time.

Each instant of time – is fulfilled – in God's eternity.

Because the Holy Spirit, with her smile of joy, touches all things.

Revealing humanity as the most precious stone within God's precious temple." Fr. A. Schmemmann, *For The Life of the World*, paraphrased.

When we exclude or vilify or condemn, we forget this essential truth of our faith.

When we worship idols, deceive ourselves, or fixate on self-preservation, we forget this essential truth of our faith.

But when we work in solidarity with the least, the lost and the left behind, then we find ourselves marching in the magnificent parade of God.

One which sweeps up everything — and everyone — into the unimaginable glory of God!

By gathering all of creation and uniting it with the divine, Pentecost sets in motion the beginning of that banquet promised so long ago by the prophet Isaiah:

"On this mountain, the Lord ... will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, of well-aged wines.

And he will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples.

He will swallow up death forever.

And God will wipe away every tear from every face, for the Lord has spoken." Isa. 25:6-8.

Thanks be to God!

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