

Global AND Tribal

The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21 1 Corinthians 12:4-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The world is becoming more globally connected, while at the same time more tribally segregated. This observation isn't anything new, but it seems like we're seeing it more and more as a true statement.

There is global evidence that we are becoming both more alike and more different at the same time. We live in a time when our horizons are both expanding and contracting. Never before has it been so easy to be in direct contact with people from all over the globe. We are now capable of instantaneously sharing ideas and solutions with people on the other side of the world. It seems every year there is new technology to enable this to happen even more efficiently. A century ago it was air transportation and the telephone. More recently, the Internet and email. Currently, it's smart phones and Twitter accounts. Who knows what's next?

In ways we have yet to comprehend, **the notion of becoming "one global village" has become a reality** right under our noses and right at our fingertips. But in contrast to that, **we continue to be a host of distinct and almost self-contained tribal villages.** And that's not too big a surprise. For the most part, the scientific world still holds itself aloof from the business world, which still is at odds with the social services network, which often passes the buck to the educational system, which is still trying to incorporate this entire digitally-generated experience.

By and large, it is true that we are each still a member of a specific "village." Perhaps that is why, as our technology makes it possible to be more global, we are becoming more and more "tribal" at the same time. We know the usuals. Jews vs. Palestinians, Chinese Communists vs. Buddhists from Tibet, one city gang vs. another city gang, in politics as well as religion we have legalistic conservatives vs. progressive liberals, in our own neighborhoods we have long-time English-speaking American citizens vs. new Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants.

The more you think about it, the more our tribal lines grow ever narrower and more discriminating. Here are a few examples. When the Soviet Union fell, Yugoslavia went right back to the violent regional clashes between ethnic and religious tribal rivals that were squelched during the reign of Communism. A similar phenomenon occurred after Saddam Hussein was removed from power in Iraq. The ousting of this heavy-handed dictator led right back to the ancient tribal wars between the Kurds and the Shiite and the Sunni Muslims.

Several countries in the Middle East and North Africa are currently experiencing what has been termed the "Arab Spring," or the "Arab Awakening." We in the west are learning that these demonstrations, protests and civil disobedience rallies against long-held dictatorships are being fueled not only by atrocious economic conditions, corrupt governments, and the desire for greater freedom and a sense of democracy, but also

by ancient tribal differences. The struggle in Libya, most specifically, is even classified as a civil war between ancient tribal peoples.

It seems that while tribalism can be squelched for a time by any given government, it can never be eliminated. In my opinion, it shouldn't be. It also seems that **while tribalism can be squelched for a time in any given religious denomination, it also can never be eliminated.** Again, in my opinion, it shouldn't be.

So maybe we really aren't as much of a single global community as we would like to think we are. Heck, there's still a deep-seated animosity between Northerners and Southerners here in the United States. (It's almost as bad as the animosity between the Sooners and the Longhorns.)

In all seriousness, **why do we continue to be so threatened by differences? Why do faces and names and places and languages and ideas and theologies and lifestyles that are different from our own bring such fear, prejudice and divisiveness?** The radical polarization in our political system is now almost unbearable. And it is making government at all levels more and more ineffective.

I would go as far as stating: **While a majority of us here at College Hill pride ourselves on our inclusiveness, the reality is that we are still infused with a tribal mentality.** After all, if we weren't so sure exactly where we stood in all the various ways to break ourselves up into tribes, we wouldn't be able to recognize that we were being so inclusive by including people of different tribes. And yet again, **who said that simply being aware of what makes us different from others – delineating our tribe from others – is always such a bad thing?**

I firmly believe that it's not only okay but in fact necessary to claim who and what we are – without the need to apologize for that. We just need to make sure that our process of judging how we differ from our neighbor doesn't turn judgmental and condemning. The worst form of tribalism, in fact, comes when one tribe judges that God is only on their side – thus justifying the clearing of the way to try and eliminate or at least subjugate all other tribes. Christianity has been, and in some places continues to be, guilty of this sin.

The question I want to raise this morning is whether the biblical story that we call Pentecost can shed any much-needed light upon how to deal with this human predicament. What does it have to say about being both global AND tribal.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke is the same author as the Book of Acts. **This rather bizarre Pentecost story was Luke's way of explaining how the gift of the Holy Spirit empowered those few fearful followers of Jesus to become a full-fledged movement, after the death of their leader no less, that grew into what we call the Christian Church.**

We often celebrate Pentecost as the Holy Spirit's gift of community and unity. While it is indeed that, it is also a celebration of human individuality. And this is why.

When Luke describes the moment when the Holy Spirit descended, which I believe was figurative and metaphorical language rather than literal eye-witness language, he notes that "divided tongues, as of fire" appeared and that "a tongue rested on each of them." **It's important to note that the Holy Spirit didn't explode like some massive fireball, covering all the people with one giant flame. Rather, we are told the Holy Spirit systematically differentiated itself into separate "tongues of fire." Each of these distinct manifestations, these separate licks of flame, then settled on a unique individual.**

The Apostle Paul reflects upon this when he informs us how the same Holy Spirit blesses each and every person with different gifts for ministry. But for the disciples, this

Pentecost event was also a unified moment of ecstasy -- a "global" experience. Yet for each individual, the experience was different. **Each disciple received a different flame of that Spirit** -- and each disciple began to speak in a different language. Then each was able to understand those different languages.

However, despite the variety and sheer diversity of sounds and expressions pouring forth from the Spirit-filled disciples, they produced a unified message -- a **"global" message**. As those witnessing this phenomenon heard and testified, all these different languages were proclaiming the same message -- **"God's deeds of power"** (v.11).

Here's the point. There is only one way, therefore, to make the growth of globalism and the ties of tribalism work together in our postmodern world. Instead of seeing others as threats to our own heightened sense of tribal protectiveness, we must be like the disciples on Pentecost and wholly enter into the tribal contexts of others.

Tribalism of the past has viewed the unique tribal differences of others as a danger -- as an organized threat to our own tribe. Tribalism of the global future must see members of other tribes as worthy of dignity and respect -- and as capable of offering something positive and significant to our own tribe.

I encourage, therefore, you to reflect this week upon a couple of questions: **How global are you? How tribal are you?** Who are the people you consider to be members of your "tribe," however it is you choose to define those boundaries, and who are the people you consider clearly not part of your tribe? As a congregation, how willing are we to embrace and accept people who would categorize themselves as coming from a different tribe as ourselves, especially theologically?

Also, for example, how does all this inform our own efforts with **Hispanic ministry**? Today, in fact, is the 4th anniversary of this congregation's endeavors into this particular ministry. For many in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, **College Hill is indeed trying to model what it means to be both tribal and global at the same time**. There are a lot of people watching to see just how we are working together to make this happen.

I would suggest that we are experiencing, at some level, what those first disciples experienced on Pentecost. Like that ancient community of faith, it is the same Spirit of God who binds together people as diverse as day and night into a common bond of love and compassion.

The great American poet Carl Sandburg wrote the introduction to a book entitled *The Family of Man*. It included these words:

The first cry of a newborn baby in Chicago or Zamboanga, in Amsterdam or Rangoon, has the same pitch and key, each saying, 'I am! I have come through! I belong! I am a member of the Family.'

The Spirit at Pentecost is the same Spirit alive and working in, around, and through us today, calling us to unity and inclusivity, and not *in spite of*, but rather *because of* our differences and tribal uniqueness. We are called to be both global AND tribal. How we choose to live that out makes all the difference in the world.

Amen.