

A good question: “What does this mean?”

We don’t know what really happened,
but we can sense what mattered to the storyteller.

Many of Jesus’ followers fled different ways,
but some returned to Jerusalem to try to keep what was a Jewish reform movement alive.

Surely a feeling of the presence of God’s spirit of love held them together.

And over time their circle came to include people from other nations
and people who spoke different languages.

What was amazing was that they could communicate about their experience of Jesus,
what he showed them, and what he taught them, and what they felt,
and what they believed to be the presence of God.

They could share these things. Something brought them together.

Pentecost – we call it Pentecost.

Pentecost was the experience of unity amidst all the differences.

It inspires me to celebrate this church season of Pentecost in a very plural way.

What does that mean? It means that it is time to affirm the oneness of the world’s living religions.

Today, we join about 350 congregations in doing just that -
celebrating pluralism as we celebrate Pentecost.

Why don’t all Christian congregations celebrate Pentecost in this way?

Because we do not all agree about this.

Some Christian churches identify more with words attributed to Jesus
like John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Let’s call this (just for our purposes today) an exclusivist position.

Yet, in that same Gospel, Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well
who asks him which mountain is the proper place for worship, and Jesus responds:
“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship what you do not know.
But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father
in spirit and truth. God is spirit, and those who worship him, worship in spirit and truth.

This is very different than the other.

Jesus was not anti-Jew; he was not anti-Samaritan.

What he did was show a way beyond the tribalism of religion and ethnicity.

He reached out from within his own tradition.

Surely that is what Pentecost is about.

I do not believe there is just one way to God.

Our mission statement affirms the wisdom in all the world's living faiths.

We recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's kingdom.

And there again we run into a lack of words.

It's not really a kingdom but it is something big.

We accept that their ways are true for them, as ours is for us.

Jerald Stinson, a United Church of Christ pastor talks about three ways religious people think about other religions. I want to share this with you. The first *is exclusivism* - many Christians and people of other religions think this way. *Exclusivism* was central to the Christian theology of Jerry Falwell and some other television evangelists.

We heard from the Moral Majority or what emerged as the Religious Right -

really more spurred by politicians than pastors.

But, nevertheless it advocated an exclusivist view.

Not just Christian – Orthodox Jewish settlers in Israel would express an exclusive view toward religion.

Those with an exclusive view span a wide range of religious belief and practice - from people who are compassionate and caring to those who are militant in destructive ways.

Karen Armstrong writes about fundamentalists – a group of believers within all major religions who believe that their fellow believers are making too many concessions to secular society.

So, they ban together to try and recapture what they see as the purity of their religion.

This is a brief look at an exclusive way to be religious.

I believe being exclusive is contrary to *everything for which Jesus stood*.

Many of those who received God's mercy in our scriptures are people of other faiths -

a Roman centurian, a Syrophenician, a Samaritan woman.

Harvard professor Diana Eck said,

"Jesus did not see Christianity, Judaism, or the other 'isms' we use to categorize people of faith today.

He simply saw faith."

The second way people regard other faiths is something we might call inclusivism.

While an exclusive view might characterize some more conservative Christian believers, people who consider themselves often consider themselves moderate or liberal Christians.

One might say that other religions are not absolutely wrong, or evil.

They nevertheless need the fulfillment of Jesus Christ.

A religious person with an inclusive view wants to affirm that we can learn from other religions as long as we recognize that their truths would only eventually lead them to the ultimate truth that our own religion leads to.

To be inclusive is to be tolerant – but from a superior point of view.

At Vatican II, Pope John XXIII said:

“The Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. We have a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from our own teaching, nevertheless reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all people. But we proclaim without fail, that Christ alone is the way, the truth and the life.”

The inclusivist says Christianity is the most important religion because it has Christ.

It may not have the only truth, but it is clearly the best.

Theologian Karl Rahner spoke of “anonymous Christians” as people who may practice other religions.

They may not affirm Christ but who are nevertheless saved through Christ’s power.

They just don’t know it.

I find that an arrogant view, but some feel that way.

So those who are inclusive are more tolerant.

Now we come to what I think we are about today – and that is pluralism.

Generally speaking, and there surely are exceptions, this point of view says your religion is as good for you as mine is for me. It would say there are many forms of truth - many meaningful pathways to God - Many paths to hike to the top of the same mountain – to use a mountain image.

I am a Christian, as Christian as I think you can get.

But as a pluralist I will not claim total truth for my being Christian.

There are just mysteries beyond what I know and understand.

I especially don’t want walls keeping out the views of others and I don’t consider their beliefs as just a part of mine,

as if mine had to make theirs more complete.

God's many-sided-ness cannot be contained in any tradition, even mine.

This is something to celebrate, not a problem to overcome.

Gandhi once said, "I do not want my house walled in on all sides and windows shut. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible."

A Hindu verse says, "Truth is one; but the *wise* call it by many names."

Think about that. Isn't that the way it is described – that first Christian Pentecost?

So pluralism is not tolerance. It is a quest for understanding anchored,
I believe, in dialogue – genuine, sincere, dialogue.

I share the wisdom of my faith with others, and I learn from theirs.

Krister Stendahl, Dean of the Divinity School at Harvard, speaks of "sacred envy."

What he means by this is, "I am not going to convert to your religion,
but I see something in your faith that I really like;
that can enrich my own."

Diana Eck, puts it like this:

I have found that only as a pluralist can I be faithful
to the mystery and presence of the one I call God."

This is what I want to call "sacred sharing."

And I want to encourage us to learn whenever we can,
experience all we can of the great traditions.

We have a Buddhist study group already here on Thursday evenings at the church.

Last year we had the opportunity to share in the Jewish Grassroots Initiative,
and perhaps we will find more ways to stretch our experience of what we call God.
I would like to bring some new experiences, perhaps like the Tibetan prayer bowls
one Sunday into our worship here.

We already have our yoga practice of Praying the Psalms.

Thomas Goodhue, director of the Long Island Council of Churches said,
"I appreciate the way Buddhists gently nudge us to unplug, turn off the noise,
and just be silent for awhile."

I can think of no more meaningful observances in the world than the Jewish Roshshanah and Yom Kippur, and the Christian Holy Week and Easter. They all have something for us.

A few years ago an Islamic newspaper, *Infocus*, asked several young Muslim adults what prophetic message of Muhammad resonated with them.

A 20-year old said, "There is much I admire about the prophet, but one thing that comes to mind is messages of treating others kindly.

He taught us to respond to evil with kindness."

Or a 19-year old woman who said, "He always worked hard to end oppression, protect human rights and restore dignity to all, especially women. He is a perfect example for all to emulate."

One after another of things we might not expect given the images of Islam gained from the media and by the extremists whose voices are very loud.

You see, pluralism does not demean, look down on or just tolerate others. It calls us to dialogue so we can learn from others and enrich our own journeys.

One example, I want to leave you with:

In 2001 in Afghanistan, the Taliban destroyed two of the world's oldest Buddha statues. For more than 1,500 years the Buddha's towering figures had stood on the cliffs of the Bamiyan Valley.

This is a valley that in some ways links Europe and Central Asia.

A year later, when the Taliban had been defeated, Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's new leader, announced that the people of Afghanistan would rebuild the larger of the two Buddha statues."

When you think about a country that is predominantly Islamic, and you consider that Islam is deeply opposed to religious idols, think of the openness expressed by this country to rebuild a Buddhist statue.

President Karsai understood that what was necessary was an action equal to and opposite - from the action that destroyed the statues.

The rubble of the second statute was left untouched as a reminder of the devastation of religious bigotry.

Sacred Sharing – based on Acts 2: 1-12
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Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit – which has not the boundaries we religious people often have.

That is why it is my favorite Sunday. Perhaps it can come to be yours.¹

I think through it, we can be more faithful to the mystery and presence of the one we call Christ, and the one we call god. For there is sacred sharing that will deepen our experience of God, of the Holy Spirit, and of Pentecost itself.

¹ Parts of this sermon are drawn from a sermon by Rev. Jerald Stinson, First Congregational Church, March 27, 2007 in celebration of Pentecost and Pluralism.