

Pentecost Sunday June 5, 2022

Family of God

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There is a lovely scene in the 2002 independent rom-com film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* that finds the protagonist, a woman named Toula, sitting in her room wondering if her upcoming marriage is hurting her father. The background for those who have yet to see this wonderful film and for those of us for whom it's been a while, the movie is an uplifting story about one person's search for love and identity in a family that has so much love it can seem smothering and a strong tie to their Greek heritage. Toula's father in particular is proud to be from Greece and wants his children to share that pride. When his daughter fell in love and became engaged to a man whose heritage is not Greek, he was crestfallen. Toula was torn because she was in love with a wonderful person and at the same time did not want to hurt her father, who she also loves. That is why she asked her mother if her upcoming marriage was hurting her father.

Toula's mother's response is not only wise, but also the embodiment of love. "Your father is your father," she said and went on to describe what it was like growing up in a country where there were several wars, what life was like under a dictatorship and why she decided that was no way to live. Then she said to her daughter, "We came here for you, so you could live. I gave you a life so you could live it."

That is when Toula realized she wasn't hurting anyone by marrying the person she loves, she was living and sometimes living is messy because things don't always happen like we want or expect them to. Eventually, her father accepted Toula's husband, in his own way, of course. But still, the family grew and neither their love nor sense of identity as a family suffered from the growth; in fact the opposite was true as it was joyful.

It may not have the energetic presence of fire and wind, but this scene from a twenty-year-old movie points us to what this Sunday's celebration is about. Pentecost is the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not all the Gospels record this event as dramatically as the author of the Acts of the Apostles in our first reading this morning. In John's Gospel Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on to his disciples when he appeared to them in the upper room on the day of his resurrection. It is a much calmer, gentler scene, like the one in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. But the details of how the Holy Spirit was given isn't as important as why it has been given and what we are supposed to do with it.

We heard in the reading from John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit is an embodiment of God present here on earth. The Holy Spirit influences and teaches us and is what binds those who receive it to each other and God. Not as minions

who do God's labor, but as we read in the section of Romans this morning, as God's beloved children. This is the Spirit that drives and inspires us to embody the love of God on earth and makes us God's family. A family that – when we are at our best - has so much love it can make room for each other, like Toula's family, even if that can sometimes be a messy process.

That is the message from the Acts of the Apostles when the disciples moved from being inside in their safe space that was just for them into the streets where they talked about God at work in the world in the language of the people in those streets. That was them living out the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was so messy and startling some folks accused the disciples of being under the influence of another kind of spirit. I've always found that part funny. People out in public talking about God in a positive way in someone's native language was seen as so bizarre it was interpreted as a bunch of people being inebriated. In other words, the behavior and message were discounted as nonsense because it was contrary to some commonly accepted notion. However, the assumption of an angry God punishing people who are different is often accepted without question. I've experienced dismissal and disbelief before, and it still makes me wonder about the foundation of such assumptions.

Because he wanted to go somewhere warm after our January 7 wedding, my husband and I honeymooned in the Dominican Republic in the lovely seaside city of Punta Cana. This city has several resorts, as tourism is one of their main sources of income. This means the people who live there are familiar with the ways of tourists and probably had reason to assume visitors from America were rude, demanding, and whatever else justifies calling American tourists 'ugly'. So, when I started conversations with the people who worked at the resort we stayed at in Spanish (their native language), asking them about their lives and families, they never believed me when I told them where I am from. "No, you aren't American," person after person said to me, "You are joking." Then they'd look me over and tell me I was from France or Brazil or a European country. I couldn't even get someone to guess I was from Canada. All because I spoke Spanish and showed an interest in who they were. After a while, I think a few believed me. My husband likes to joke (because he is rustier with Spanish) that once he spoke up, most folks were more likely to believe we are from America.

I was struck with how hard it was for so many kind and intelligent people to believe I am American. It made me wonder about my fellow American travelers and the impression they left behind that was so hard for me to challenge. Yet, the day we left, so many people on staff had genuine tears in their eyes, wished us safe travels and told us to come back as we always have a home with them. I don't believe that was something they said to everyone.

Perhaps the reason we are given the Holy Spirit is to share the love of God with a world that has known so much pain and suffering and anger and violence and rude behavior that it is hard for them to believe God can be anything other than a *more* angry, *more* violent, *more* punitive, and abusive power because that is *all* they know. This makes it difficult to tell about the good works of God that are just as real in the world. Things like the joy of forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and life-giving things that happen every day that don't always get much attention. All the acts and systems of injustice, discrimination, and violence that fill up newspapers and newsfeeds make it difficult to persuade people there is another way of being, and that people and the church don't have to be like what is in the news. The church doesn't have to be like those corporations obsessed with big profits that only wants to consume resources and then move on. It isn't easy to convince people we want to show God's love instead of distressing over the church's loss of perceived social influence or prestige. If it was hard to convince people in Punta Cana to believe I am from America just because I speak Spanish and am kind, it can be even more difficult to convince people God really does love all people regardless of age, gender, experience, social and economic status, race, occupation, sexual orientation, even political affiliation, and wants us to care for each other by making the world more equitable, sustainable, and merciful for everyone, especially the vulnerable; that together we can help make the world more like heaven, God's Kingdom here on earth. One thing we can take away from our readings today is that the Holy Spirit is not confined to one location, no matter how sacred or beautiful the space, but goes with us wherever we go.

But just because something is difficult doesn't mean it is impossible. Perhaps that is why we have days like this in the church, to remind us of the importance of persevering in showing God's love through our ministries by adapting them to meet the reality of our neighborhood and the changes in our community, which to me is like speaking the native languages of passersby. One way we can do that now is to explore ways to engage on-line as well as in-person and make room for both in meetings, schools, families and here at church. And to live our lives as individuals wherever we happen to find ourselves, influenced by the Holy Spirit evidenced in how we treat each other.

It won't always be easy, and might be messy at times, but it can be good. We have been given the Holy Spirit so we can live that life, and as we do, as a church and individuals, we will experience the joy of making room for more people in the beloved family of God.