
A Beauty Too Great to Bear

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth C. Knowlton
Pentecost Sunday
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

I remember stumbling off the plane, exhausted, disoriented, and confused. I was returning from a semester overseas in college and I hit the JFK airport with a mixture of excitement and sadness. My grand adventure was ended, and now I was on the journey back home. I was changed but unsure how those changes would integrate into my old life. I was not prepared for how overwhelmed I would feel. And why did it seem so loud? It felt as if suddenly the volume had been turned up and I was being assaulted with loud Christmas music and incredibly loud conversations.

It took me a while to figure out why I was feeling so overwhelmed by sound. Was it really that much louder in New York than Jerusalem? Was my jet lag so profound? It took me a few minutes, but I suddenly realized the I actually understood the side conversations around me. I understood the mom yelling at her child to hurry up, the frustrated words being muttered under the breath of someone lost and battling an over-sized suitcase. The airport employees talking and joking as they went about their business were no longer distant, but like old friends sharing a common story.

I could not block them out as white noise, because I actually understood the words being spoken. I had spent the last three months in countries where I was often surrounded by conversations that were in a language I did not understand. And I had gotten so used to blocking those conversations out, that I now needed to adjust to a place where I could. The volume was indeed up, and I had to hear in a new way.

There is something rather jarring about thinking you will understand what will be spoken, and finding yourself instead in a place of confusion. But there is also something jarring about thinking you will not understand what is being spoken, and finding yourself understanding the words.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Today is the feast of Pentecost, and if you have never been in church on this particular Sunday, you might be feeling slightly off balance after hearing the gospel read. As you heard multiple languages when you expected only one, you might have wondered about problems with our sound system, or whether this was intentional or a mistake. Probably at some point you assumed it was something that was planned and felt some relief when it was over. But while the confusion was off putting, I wonder if for the early church it really was the unity that was most confusing.

We hear in Acts the story of birth of the church. Unlike the Tower of Babel, where the crowd becomes divided by language, here we find a unity coming as a gift of the spirit. But we hear at the same time these words from Jesus about what that gift might mean. We are promised an Advocate, a Mediator, a Comforter, a Guide. But it is hard to exactly pin it down. There is a sense in which we know the Holy Spirit when we see it and experience it. There is a sense in which the Holy Spirit is always mystery, always just beyond our reach. The more deeply we enter, the more we understand that we really are not

able to bear the fullness or the weight of that mystery.

It is not unlike the journey we undertake in baptism. This morning we will baptize five month old Tye Herrington McOmber. We are making promises on his behalf that we cannot understand. We do not know how his life will unfold, but his family and this community have decided to be part of the journey. By naming the mystery, we have named our trust in the spirit to guide him. And we have a chance when we reaffirm our own baptismal commitments to join his story with ours. It is that linking with the community of saints that gives us the support we need to embrace mystery with joy and not with hesitancy.

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Every time I hear this passage my first reaction is to wonder what it is that I cannot bear? Is there some horror that I am going to be asked to come to grips with that Jesus hid from the disciples and now has to hide from me?

Or perhaps, what I cannot bear is something so beautiful and precious that it is literally beyond my grasp.

When my daughter Rebecca was in the sixth grade she transferred to a new school. Part of the curriculum was to learn to play the violin using the Suzuki method. You do not start with learning the language of reading music. You start by learning how to hold the bow. Over a period of time you work your way up to playing twinkle, twinkle, little star. The parents are required to be there, and I must say I found it a challenge. Beginning violin students typically do not create beautiful sounds. In fact, I am not sure the neighborhood cats have any corner on screeching compared to these students.

At some point in the year, their instructor played something for them at the end of the class. It was incredible. The students and parents were brought to a complete stop as they listened to this incredibly gifted musician make his violin come alive. It was as if he were playing a completely different instrument, and there was no doubt it was a completely different language. Gone was the confusion of elementary hacking, and in our ears now rang the melodious unity of music which transcended any barriers.

I was dumbfounded. In all these months, I had never heard him play anything but twinkle, twinkle, little star. I had no idea he was so talented. But what really overwhelmed me was a realization that came suddenly in the beauty of what he was playing. I realized that this wonderful musician was spending most of his life, teaching children to play an instrument he loved. And his love for it was so great, he was willing to endure an incredible level of cacophony to hear perhaps the strains of a few students who might become great musicians. He did not seem to resent their inability to play or hear music in the way he did. He wanted to be part of their journey.

It is the journey we undertake at Pentecost, and it is the journey of our baptized life. We hear the unity and spend the rest of our lives moving towards it. We have a lot of bad notes we may hit on the way, and at times our communities may feel as if they are closer to the Tower of Babel, than they are to the vision in Acts. But we are promised that we are not alone. That the Spirit, the Advocate has been sent to guide us. And what we cannot see or hear now, is the absolute beauty of the gift we are being offered.

Amen.