

To Sneer or To Wonder

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I was watching an obscure French TV show recently about a young woman in her first job as a Rabbi. Each episode deals with an aspect of ministry that she is doing for the first time and it is a fiction show, not reality. Like I said, obscure. But I was really struck by one episode that focused on a bar mitzvah (the ritual in the Jewish faith that usually happens around 13 years old and marks the transition of child to adult). The Rabbi gets a call from a father who really, really wants his son to be bar mitzvahed but his son doesn't want to be. The tradition is really important to the father, who is also hoping this celebration will help him reconnect with his own father, so he asks the Rabbi to talk to his son.

When the Rabbi goes in to talk to the son, she's expecting a typical teenager who just doesn't want to do something his dad wants him to do. But, she chooses to be curious and ask very open questions of the young man. What she learns is that he is very, very focused on the issue of climate change. He thinks his dad is being ridiculous to want to throw a party that would produce so much waste and he thinks it's absurd his dad thinks a bar mitzvah is important in a world that, as he sees it, is careening to an end.

So the rabbi explains this to his father. The father thinks his son is being silly, "too woke" and self-important. He doesn't see why throwing a party is a big deal, so instead of talking with his son, he thinks he's compromised by hiring a party planner to come up with eco-friendly ideas like: yarmulkes (head coverings) that can be planted after use because they have seeds in them and compostable plates and donations to offset carbon emissions. The father proudly presents this new plan to his son, who feels like his dad hasn't heard him at all and storms out.

It takes a great deal more communication between them through the Rabbi before they finally can find a compromise where they both feel heard and understood.

The father and son speak the same language but still needed a go-between to help them figure out how to really listen to each other; how to show up with a curiosity and desire to understand the other; how to stop jumping to the conclusion that the other was just being silly or unnecessarily difficult. It's just one example but a very common human problem.

Even when we speak the same language, communication is hard work. We are so often consumed by our own feelings, so determined to get our own point across, so focused on getting what we want, that we can't hear what someone else is saying. Too often, we just can't manage to put ourselves in another person's shoes; can't adjust enough to see

things from their perspective, and worse, we all too often judge other peoples' perspectives as ridiculous, silly, or needlessly difficult. Bad communication leads to so many problems in relationships, and can lead to the end of them.

And that's when we speak the same language. It's easy enough to misunderstand even those closest to us; people who share the same culture, language, background. When you add up the variety of ways we can be different from one another, it's no wonder the misunderstandings increase. When an entirely different language is involved – oof, things get more challenging quickly. We live in a world with over 7,000 languages spoken which even with 8 billion people, that's a lot of chances to misunderstand one another. Some days it seems impossible to imagine real understanding can ever happen between most people.

Enter the story of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit.

When we read the Pentecost story, what stands out is the long list of places. It's easy to recognize some of the countries listed (Egypt, Libya, Rome/Italy), but others go by different names now: Turkey, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Israel - it's basically a list of people from everywhere in the world that people would have had contact with at the time. They have all come to Jerusalem for a Jewish holiday, so they are primarily Jews, but that is where the similarities end. These people are from different nations. They speak different languages, eat different foods, live in very different cultures. There are lots of opportunity for misunderstanding and it's into this diverse community the Holy Spirit enters with a mission.

My friend and fellow preacher Mamie put it this way:

“Presumably the Spirit could have enabled all these different people to understand one common language, but instead she creates a community that speaks to everyone in their own language. The Spirit invites those who wish to be a part of this movement to belong to it with their full selves, without surrendering their distinctiveness...”

It means that linguistic barriers, and presumably other types of barriers, are meant to be overcome, but not by requiring conformity. The connections we are called to make are meant to happen by meeting people where *they* are, not just where *we* are. We see that learning about, getting situated in, finding beauty and utility in the experiences and identities of others is baked into the formation of the church. And while *all* were amazed by this - and perplexed, which is fair I think - there were some who landed in a position of wonder and curiosity and others who chose to sneer and make fun instead.”

And it's that last part of what Mamie said which really caught my attention: “Some landed in a position of wonder and curiosity and others chose to sneer and make fun instead.” Sneering isn't a commonly used word, but the translators who chose it are

painting a picture of people who are mocking, ridiculing, looking down on the disciples. This makes the difference between those two responses quite vast. Responding with wonder or curiosity creates the possibility of learning and gaining understanding, while sneering and making fun shuts everything down and creates further separation.

Unfortunately, just like then, today, there is plenty of sneering and making fun in the world. I would say it seems to be the default of our social and political common life – sneering towards anyone who is different, who speaks differently, who loves differently, who is educated differently, who worships differently. Consider how often you have overheard or been part of conversations where people are talking with a sneer about how stupid another group is - how ridiculous or how ignorant. We wonder: how can “they” be like that? How can “they” think that? But, even worse is how quickly sneering becomes distrust and distrust becomes fear. Sneering is a fast track to being more convinced than ever that our differences can’t be overcome. It helps to create a feeling that it would be better for us to just retreat more and more into a silo of homogeneous communities - “stick to our own kind” - whatever “kind” happens to mean to you.

In this Pride month, there is a popular meme that has been around a few years which always takes my breath away. It says: “Pride is important because there is still someone out there who thinks maybe being dead is better than being gay and that’s not ok.” It begs the question, why would anyone think it was better to be dead than to be themselves? And the answer is, at least partially, because so many people have sneered at, mocked, ridiculed, looked down on them. The kind of harm that sneering causes cannot be understated. When we choose that position, we not only cause greater separation in our communities, but real harm to individuals.

It is hard to overstate how different an approach of wonder and curiosity can be; what a different outcome that change of attitude can bring about. But that is what the Spirit was inviting the crowd to do on Pentecost – to come into community with wonder and curiosity. But, unfortunately, wonder and curiosity can be harder than sneering or poking fun.

They are harder because while wonder and curiosity may inspire greater understanding and fuel our passion for exploration and learning, both also require us to be vulnerable. Both require us to admit there are things we don’t know and don’t understand. They each ask us to surrender to uncertainty and to risk possibly being told we should mind our own business. Both can lead us to discovering things which make us uncomfortable or that we don’t like. It is much easier to put on our armor of sneer and sarcasm.

But take a moment to think about if you’ve ever sat and talked with someone who was genuinely really curious about you? Someone who really wanted to understand you? What did that feel like? What did they do? Likely, they asked open ended questions and

really listened. Maybe they shared something from their own life they thought connected or was similar, but mostly they probably listened with patience, interest and even expressed some wonder about you. Doesn't being listened to that way change so much about what we are willing to share and how vulnerable we are willing to be? When we are met with a posture of wonder and curiosity, we are willing to show so much more of ourselves.

What would it be like if, when we encountered someone we thought was different; someone we thought we disagreed with; someone we didn't see much in common with and were willing to wonder a bit, be a little curious, instead of immediately retreating to our side and our feelings? What might we learn? What connections might we find?

Now, maybe you might think that's all a little Pollyanna - a little too optimistic. Maybe you would say, but look at how bad things are, Pastor Jenny. Look at how deeply divided we are. Look at how much we misunderstand each other. Look at the violence and war and hate crimes. Have you seen "those" people? They are too different. We could never find common ground at this point. You think the Spirit can help us overcome all of that? You think some wonder and curiosity can make THAT big a difference?

Well, the Pentecost story is about a group of disciples who were still hiding in an upper room even after Jesus had come to them resurrected. Jesus had eaten with them and offered them peace and still they were in an upper room. But then, Pentecost happened. The Holy Spirit arrived and the ones who showed some wonder and curiosity heard the story of Jesus and chose to be baptized that day - 3,000 of them.

And after that the disciples stopped hanging out in upper rooms and instead went out and told anyone who would listen about Jesus. They started communities of faith. They preached the gospel. They healed people. They fed people. They did not back down in the face of the powerful people who wanted them to be quiet. Every single one of them kept telling the story of Jesus until they were martyred. And those 3,000 new disciples went home to wherever they were from and told people about Jesus too.

And that is the reason, 2,000 years later, we are still telling this story. So, tell me now, what do you believe is possible when people show up with a bit of wonder and curiosity?

That's why today we try to lean into wonder and curiosity as a congregation. We see in the bible and in stories like Pentecost an encouragement to not only study the bible but to do studies on things like racism and issues facing the LGBTQ community. Those studies help us to ask better questions and inspire us to learn more directly from people who have been sneered at. It's why we try to wonder together about what we could do to make people feel more welcome, more comfortable. What can we do to help people be more willing to be vulnerable here and really share the whole of who they are in this

community? It leads to changes like statements on our website, changing our bathrooms, going to be part of a community garden in a different neighborhood, giving money to non-profits that do good work in our community especially to people often sneered at and doing our best to stay curious.

Ultimately, I hope our time together here helps us to be the kind of people who choose wonder and curiosity instead of sneering, making fun, sarcasm and cynicism. I hope we'll be people who ask questions and listen carefully. I hope we'll believe that the Spirit can connect us to even the people who seem most different from us. I hope we will be the ancestors who continue this story for people 2,000 years from today. Amen.