

PENTECOST | JUNE 5, 2022

GENESIS 11:1-9 | PSALM 104:24-34, 35B | ACTS 2:1-21 | JOHN 14:8-17

In the first centuries after Jesus was raised from the dead, believers had to find language to talk about what God had just done. Somebody would write something like, “Jesus became God when he was baptized.”¹ And then people would say, “Eh, that’s not quite right.” And they’d hash it out.

There were some other people who started using a different method. Instead of defining who God is, they’d define God by talking about what God isn’t. God isn’t this pew. God isn’t this lectern. God isn’t the earth. And you clear out all the stuff God isn’t until you’re left with a clearer picture of God. The word we use to describe this is “apophatic” theology. Apophatic comes from the Greek for “negative speech.” It means defining something by negation.²

The apophatic method seems a little bit weird at first, but we use a similar logic in our lives all the time. The most obvious example is our politics where negative partisanship drives so much of our identity expression. We don’t vote for people as much as we vote against other people. We often use negative framing to make important life choices. Maybe you chose to go to Indian Hills High School not because you liked it, but because you really want to go to Ramapo. Or vice-versa. And of course, we do it in our understandings of faith communities. We define ourselves against other denominations (We are not like the Catholic Church. We are not like the Missouri Synod.) or, somehow even worse, even against our partner ELCA congregations (We are not like Redeemer Ramsey. We are not like Good Shepherd Glen Rock.³).

You can understand the appeal of creating an apophatic identity. For one, it’s quick. Instead of coming up with your own vision from scratch, which is tiresome and complicated, you can just point to something that already exists. And even more important, it makes us feel good. When we contrast ourselves with others, it’s usually to show how superior we are.

And that’s where the danger lies. Apophatic identities are convenient and comforting. But they rarely create anything new. They are always limited by the world others have imagined. And while they can make the connections between us stronger, they need more and more people to define themselves against. You feel like you’re moving fast, but you’re really just in a death spiral.

¹ This was called “adoptionism.” Just a good hypothetical.

² If you’re curious, some good examples are in “The Life of Moses” in Gregorius et al., *Gregory of Nyssa (CWS)* (Paulist Press, 1978). and Paul Rorem, *The Dionysian Mystical Theology* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015).

³ No bagpipes, I guess?

Pentecost gives us a radically different vision of how God creates, sustains, and directs communities. Not through negation but through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes our life together possible. And it does that by giving us an identity, connecting us with all God's people, and sending us to serve in all creation.

The Holy Spirit gives us our identity. In his explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed, Martin Luther wrote, "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith."⁴

In other words, our life together doesn't begin by us choosing to come to Jesus. But the Holy Spirit calls us through the gospel and brings us to the place where Jesus is. So our identities aren't something we have to construct for ourselves from scratch. And our identities aren't something we create by borrowing someone else's and saying *Well, not that*. Our identity in Christ is a gift that is freely given to us. And every time the Holy Spirit calls us through font, word, and table, we're brought to the place where Jesus is again and again. And reminded of who we actually are: not a people who chose God, but a people called by God.

This new identity overflows into our relationships, our connections, with the world around us. What is the most important image in this Pentecost story? The wind and the fire are exciting, sure. But it's really the language. The ability to communicate in other people's languages. For much of the church's history, this was literal. It meant translating the Bible into Latin and Arabic and Spanish and English. If you can't communicate in someone's language, it's going to be nearly impossible to form any kind of connection.

But we might think about this more metaphorically. How do we translate the good news into language that people actually use? Just to pick a couple examples, if you're not part of a church community, you probably don't use the word "sin" a lot. But you probably have some notion that the world isn't ordered toward its flourishing, and that we're affected by forces beyond our own decisions. You might not use the word "grace" a lot. But you know the feeling of being accepted as you are without any conditions put around it. The Holy Spirit gives us language where we can meet.

And when we do that kind of translating, we're not moving away from our faith, but we're following the movement of the Holy Spirit toward our neighbors. St. Luke tells us that when the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples, it wasn't contained to their own vision and their own community. Who does it involve?

⁴ This is p. 1162 of the *ELW*, I think?

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. It might as well be the whole world.

As we confess in the Apostles Creed, God creates a community that is catholic. Catholicity means that we are concerned with all of God's creation. Some of you may remember that a few years ago, our mission/vision/welcome taskforce sent out a survey to the congregation with a bunch of questions on it. And one of the questions was *Who is this congregation called to serve?* And one of the answers we got back said *I know the answer is everyone, but for logistical reasons I'm going to say people who live in town.* The first half of that was perfect. Everyone is someone God desires to be in relationship with. So whenever we try to define ourselves over and against others, we are always defining ourselves over and against people God desires to be in communion with. Instead, being brought to the place where Jesus is brings us closer to our neighbors.

Our communities, our country, and our world are filled with so much apophatic thinking. So many attempts to find an identity and create community by defining ourselves against others and trying to succeed through their failure.

Pentecost gives us all a different way to live. Of being drawn together by the power of God, given language to connect with the needs of the world, and being sent to love and serve all God's creation. You've probably noticed that this is how God's work gets done every week. We're assembled together, called through the gospel, and sent into God's beloved the world.

There may not be winds and tongues of fire. But the gift of the Spirit still pours into our lives, and the lives of God's creation, each day.

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