

“Many Languages, One Spirit”

I moved to Minnesota 30 years ago this month. I call Minnesota home now but it did take some getting used to. I needed to learn how to say hot dish instead of casserole and how to say “uffdah” appropriately. Within communities and within friend and family groups we often have our own language or variations of language we use to communicate with each other. And my example is how even regions of our country have their own language.

One community of which I had no experience with when I moved here was the hunting community. I moved here from New York City and the only thing I really knew about guns was that they were used sometimes in a violent manner to shoot someone during a robbery. This was in addition to my father who would use a shotgun for skeet shooting. Now don’t get me wrong, I do know my way around guns. I took marksmanship at summer camp and turned out to be a good shot. I had the NRA badges to prove it.

So, yes, hunting as a sport was completely new to me when I arrived here. I learned that hunters have their own language, their own customs and traditions. I have come to respect hunters though I have no desire to hunt myself. I just know that they belong to a community different from my own as they hunt for very specific reasons. Without my own desire to hunt, I can respect those that do.

Now, using assault weapons to kill innocent people is a whole different conversation than that of hunters. Since May 14th alone, mass shootings occurred in Buffalo, NY; Uvalde, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Racine, Wisconsin, among others. Depending on who is counting and how they count, some estimates are that we have had over 200 mass shootings in our country in just this year – just this year alone! In addition to mass shootings, sadly, suicides account for over 50% of deaths by handgun in 2020, according to the BBC. For those who keep a gun for self-protection, it turns out that only about 3% of guns purchased are actually used for self-protection.

Report after report tells us that our country leads in gun ownership in the world. The BBC study goes on to report that the US has 120.5 guns per 100 residents.

The next country is Yemen with 52.8 guns per 100 residents. The rest in the list of top ten countries come in with about 30 to 39 guns per 100 residents. The last 8 countries range from Serbia to Canada to Cyprus and Finland.

Guns for hunting or self-protection are one thing. Using guns against innocent people or turned on ourselves is a whole other conversation. So, we collectively ask the question –Why is this happening? Why are guns used so often in a violent manner? The question is not a conservative or progressive question. It is not a Republican or Democrat question. It is a Christian question. Why are we killing each other? Why are we killing ourselves? Why are we allowing dangerous weapons in the hands of those who wish to harm innocent people or themselves?

Pretty somber thinking. Then I remembered a line from a 1980's movie called "The Big Chill" in which a minister leading a funeral service asks "where is the hope?" We are at a place in our history where we can ask the same thing – where is the hope? When will the violence end? Where is the peace which passes all understanding that Jesus promises us?

I want to share a newsletter note from the Rev. Brooks Berndt, the UCC Environmental Justice Minister. He publishes a newsletter titled "The Pollinator". In this week's message, he shares encouraging words of hope for us in a time in which we may feel powerless and not just in regards to the environment but with all the events in our world. In his words:

Dear Pollinators (reference to recipients of his newsletter):

I am of the opinion that the most important conversation to have in the United States right now is not another conversation about how nothing will ever change when it comes to climate change, school shootings, white supremacy, and fill-in-the-blank-issue-of-life-and-death-significance. The most important conversation right now is the opposite of this. It is about how do we collectively move out of the sense of powerlessness and helplessness endemic to our society.

If I focus solely on the causes of any particular societal ill, I can easily spin around and around in the nothing-will-ever-change rut of intellectualized apathy. With the climate crisis, I can cogitate endlessly on the immense powers wielded by governments and corporations. The problem with focusing only on the causes is that one loses sight of power that the rest of us have. For me, the scripture that helps me redirect my thought process is found in Ephesians 4. Here the emphasis is

on building up the Body of Christ. As part of a “whole body” we are “joined and knit together,” while each of us is uniquely “equipped” for “the work of ministry.”

*Within the Body of Christ, we each have a calling and a role that enables our individual and collective empowerment. [We have resources in our community that] are aimed at furthering both the discernment of our calling and the knowledge needed to equip ourselves for that calling as we grow a movement capable of making a vital difference today. He ends with *With gratitude for your ministry, Brooks.**

Here we are at Pentecost Sunday today. It is the birthday of the church and as a church we celebrate being the Body of Christ. We are a church made up of people of all nationalities, languages, and customs with a variety of histories. Yet, no matter our age or circumstance and not matter how large or small our contribution, we are the Body of Christ capable of making a difference.

What is Pentecost, though, in addition to being the birthday of the church? We hear how “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.” Like our world today, we speak so many different languages even in groups of people like hunters or Christians or by people of differing nationalities, races, or creeds. The church itself is not homogenous as we witness at the starting with the day of Pentecost – the day in which the church was founded. It is in their diversity as Christians that unity is achieved as we come together in the Body of Christ.

So how did it all begin? The original Pentecost celebration began in Judaism when many devout Jews from all over came together for the Feast of Weeks, a Jewish agricultural festival that happens in Jewish tradition 50 days after Passover. It is in this gathering of Jews from all over their world that the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples in a wind and in fire. The 11 remaining disciples all began to speak in different languages but amazingly the listeners could understand what was being said because they heard their own language spoken.

These Jews, who were gathered from all over for the festival, heard and witnessed God’s deeds of power in the wind and fire. What an experience to be part of and to witness. Yet, human nature’s tendency toward skepticism played out. The disciples were accused of being drunk at 9 o’clock in the morning. Peter

stood up among the crowd to proclaim that they were not indeed drunk. Peter goes on to proclaim that what they were witnessing was “spoken through the prophet Joel.”

Joel said that God will “pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women...I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy.” So, as the Spirit comes upon all, God envisions that these winds of the Spirit will bring unity to men and women, young and old, slave and free – even when they speak different languages.

Margaret Mead once said, ““Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world.” It is in those groups and in those acts that we find the hope. Where do we find the hope? Is it in what do our sons and daughters prophecy? Is the hope in the dreams of the old? One place to find the hope is in the work of grassroots organizations that work tirelessly, together with the young and old, to bring about change. As for gun violence – and notice I phrase it as “gun violence” and not “gun control.” My focus, however, is on how do we protect each other and ourselves from this type of violence? Three groups come to mind that include United Against Gun Violence, Sandy Hook Promise and closer to home, Protect Minnesota. United Against Gun Violence was founded after President Reagan’s Press Secretary, Jim Brady, was shot during a failed assassination attempt. The Sandy Hook Promise organization came into being at the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut.

In Minnesota, Protect Minnesota works hard to address gun violence. The organization is founded on the founding principle that gun violence is a tragedy that can be prevented. The organization writes that “while respecting the rights of responsible gun owners, *Protect Minnesota* defends the inalienable rights of all Americans to life, liberty from the threat of gun violence, and the pursuit of happiness in safe communities. The statewide network includes gun violence survivors, gun owners, veterans, physicians, educators, public health professionals, social workers, hunters, farmers, faith leaders, elected officials, law enforcement officers, moms, dads and all who are committed to protecting Minnesota from gun violence.

It does take a group of small dedicated people to make a difference. And as a church, how are we called to make a difference in a country where gun violence is rampant? How do we come together to honor our founding as a church and as the body of Christ? Maybe our call is to join a grassroots organization. Maybe our call is to think about what is going on critically and separate out our rights to own guns and work toward lifting up the responsibility to each other's and our children's safety. Maybe our call is to look for and share the hope as we struggle to find where it is.

We may speak different languages but we are of one spirit. So, the hope, where is it? It is in the church that was founded on this day of Pentecost. The hope is in the church that was founded on love. The hope is in the diversity that God created. The hope is with the Holy Spirit. We are given hope by our loving God who doesn't give up on us no matter how messy we make our world. May it be so. Amen.