

“Practicing Pentecost: After Being Offended”

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Biblical scholars for hundreds of years have wondered if the question – “Will you also go away?” – found in today’s reading from John’s gospel – is an echo of Jesus’ question found only in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke – “And who do men say that I am?” Peter, alone, answers these two questions. To the earlier question – “Who do people say that I am?” – Peter says, “You are the Christ of God!” But it is this other question that I want us to consider today, in our search for ways to practice Pentecost. After the crowds had gone away, offended by the hard words Jesus spoke, he asks the few remaining: “Do you also wish to leave?” And Peter confesses: “We are not leaving!” and then follows with this question: “Where else would we go?” (John 6:56-69)

The question remains: When faced with the hard words, offended by the challenges they create, will you, will I leave? To practice Pentecost, to live in the jet stream of holy Spirit presence and power is to take our place in line with others who have settled this question, once and for all, or at least until it pops up again.

I have a two-point sermon today, words that, for the most part, will not my own. The first point is my summary of a reflection of Reinhold Niebuhr, still thought by many to be America’s greatest philosopher/theologian, a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and remembered for writing the now famous “Serenity Prayer.” In an article written in 1927, Niebuhr shares what he believed Peter was trying to communicate to Jesus when asked if he would leave in response to being offended. Niebuhr heard Peter saying, “Look, what you are demanding of us is so difficult that we are tempted to leave, and yet, you have helped us to look so differently and so deeply into the meaning of life that we no longer see a decent alternative to your way and to your truth.” Every way of life, even the one Jesus modelled, offers comfort and challenge. Peter wasn’t the first, and we won’t be the last to weigh the “pluses,” the assurances that are so easy to accept against the challenges, the “minuses,” that are so difficult to embrace.

In this article, Niebuhr surveys the “ins and outs” of various alternatives, each a blend of satisfying and offensive words. But he concludes by articulating what he calls “the promise of Jesus.” May I simply read his words? – they are way better than my own.

“The promise of Jesus (against all these various alternatives) is that the love at the heart of the universe,...will be progressively revealed to anyone who will venture his life...(because the universe is really grounded in love)... He (Jesus) does not promise any easy or magical revelation of God to every chance searcher. (So this) assurance (that the universe itself is moral and will respond with helpful resources to the... aspiring soul) must come progressively to the moral adventurer. It is the pure in heart

who shall see God... (and “the pure in heart” will) fashion the means of perception by which God becomes real. Yet even when they reach that assurance they will not be saved from suffering from the world’s confusion.

To cooperate with God means, in fact, to accept the cross...(which) is a symbol of the fact that order has no easy victory in the world over chaos, (and) that love has no easy triumph over force. Christ is always assuring one half of the world that the victory of the spirit over the confusion of the world is not impossible, and the other half that victory is not easy.... The experience of Jesus upon the cross is not one of (the dreamer)...who imagines God in easy and magical control of every process in the universe. It is the experience of a spiritual adventurer who sees life as a struggle between love and chaos, but who also has discovered the love at the center of things that guarantees the victory in every apparent defeat. Is there any philosophy which accounts for all the facts of life so well? Where shall we go to receive so much strength for the struggle and so much comfort in its momentary defeats and so much assurance of the ultimate triumph?”

My first point is an echo of Peter’s – “We ain’t leaving, Jesus,” and Reinhold Niebuhr says it as well as anyone. But his words are no better, really, than how Debie Thomas answers the haunting question, “Do you also want to leave?” My second point is a selection of the words she wrote in December 2016, in an article entitled, “Why I stay: A prayer.”

“I stay because A was for Adam, B for Bethlehem, and C for Cross, and my first classroom was a pew. Because I played hide-and-seek in the font when the preacher wasn’t looking,... because I answered every altar call with a sprint down the aisle, and snuck the leftover communion juice from the glasses the church ladies washed on Mondays. I was hoping—I understand this now—to steal one drop more of you....

“I stay because you are my rootedness, my air, my water. The dark and frozen ground in which I wait to crack open, die, and sprout.... I stay because I am Eve and the apple makes sense to me. I’m Rachel and I won’t surrender my sacred objects. I’m Leah and I long to be loved.... I’m Hagar, and I will name you in the desert.... I’m the bleeding woman and I need the hem of your robe. I’m Mary Magdalene and I must bear witness by your tomb....

“I stay because childhood ends, but childhood hungers do not. Because sorrow came too many times this year, and there had better be an afterward to explain it....

Because my yearning comes from somewhere, and that somewhere must be you.... I stay because joy comes too, and it doesn’t look anything like I think it should.... I know you...in the liturgy, in the Word, in the broken bread and spilled wine. I press my palms against ancient redwood trees, and you are there. You awe me in the mountains and at the shifting edges of the ocean. I hear you in the stillness of the forest, (and) in the cacophony of birdsong....

“I stay because I’m wild inside, and you are not a tame lion. Because you suffered, and only a suffering God can help.... I stay because I am still your stubborn child, and I insist on resurrection.”

For years, I've wanted to meet Reinhold Niebuhr, and now I want to meet Debie Thomas. Their words have helped me say my own words to Jesus – “No, I'm not leaving; there are no other alternatives for me.”

Your words matter, too, you know. And not just your words.