

In this week's online *Christian Century*, Lutheran missionary and spiritual care vice president Brian Maas asked what to me seemed a very timely question.

Considering both our first reading from Acts and the portion from the Gospel of John, he wrote, "So how do we need the Spirit to show up at our Pentecost this year? Through a mighty wind and the fiery, cacophonous din of many tongues? Or via a gentle breath and the whispered commission of one peace-bringing voice? The lectionary is kind in giving us these two extremes to choose from—or foolish in allowing the boldest of us to attempt to have both."

I think we need both. The life of the spirit is always about choosing life. So, what, right now at this moment, does life need to flourish and grow? Do we want to be blown away by a mighty wind of conversion or hear Jesus speak peace to us in a still small voice?

Last week I confessed to my home parish in San Rafael that I had very mixed feelings about this whole season. I've never been comfortable with the transition from Jesus' wandering ministry to the Church's firm foundation. I'm disappointed that we haven't done as well as Jesus did in bringing comfort, healing, and hope to those who need it. It can make me a little snarky at times. How could a spiritual tradition founded on the prayer, "May they be one as the Father and I are one" have splintered into so many warring denominations, and how could so much blood have been shed in the name of Jesus?

When I read Luke's account of Pentecost, I find it hard to not think about mass rallies and the movie *Jesus Camp*. I've seen how people can be so easily and unwisely swayed and manipulated by drama, noise, emotion and desperate hope. I also miss, as Peter tests his oratory skills to fire up a community of believers, the gentle invitation of Jesus to simply, "come and see."

The Book of Acts has a very different vibe for me than the gospels. In the gospels, Jesus goes quietly about his work of healing. In the Book of Acts, they aren't so quiet. They're out getting converts. I know and love people who love Acts, but my small mind gets stuck on Paul inciting riots in Ephesus and ruining the life of a helpless slave girl in Philippi because she irritated him.

Also, as I read all this, I am saddened by the fact that we are still dealing with the same issues the apostles dealt with, the same conflation of religion and politics that Jesus so skillfully avoided until he was betrayed.

In last week's reading from Acts the disciples showed us that they, who had been with Jesus, could be as clueless as I who only know him through Bible, church, and friends. After hanging around for forty days with their risen teacher, they decided it might just be safe to bring up the kingdom question again. "Lord," they said, "is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

I spent a lot of time last Sunday wondering how Jesus might have felt about that. His answer was, as always, both tactful and enigmatic. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive

power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

You will be my witnesses, Jesus says, not my advance men, not my army, not my empire. Jesus doesn't compel. He invites. Jesus hopes that as we get to know him as he really is and ourselves as we really are we will at last understand power as he understands power.

And then he disappears into the clouds as if to say for the umpteenth time, “You figure it out.”

And when the fire of Pentecost comes down, it comes as divided tongues, as if to say, “choose well.”

Pentecost, therefore, presents a paradox of darkness and light.

Returning to Brian Maas' essay, he admits, “It's hard to beat pyrotechnics and great audio when you're trying to move a crowd. But it's been my experience that if you really want to focus people's attention, you don't get louder. You get quieter. Rather than rocking people back on their heels with volume, you tip them forward on their toes with softness.”

Jesus moved softly. Jesus invited his disciples to follow him, to come and see what he saw. While after today's reading, Peter goes on to preach about the last days and the legacy of King David, and how God will make my enemies into his footstool, Jesus reminds us that God has no enemies. I want to sit softly with a God who has no enemies. I can choose to think myself an enemy of God, but there is nothing I can do

to make God hate me. Every life on earth is essential to what God needs to show and teach us. That's only one reason why it's better to love my enemies than sit on them.

We cannot plaster over our failures with shouts of triumph. Nor can we bask in our success. In the eyes of God, we can only be real.

Getting to John's Holy Spirit story, that Easter night in the upper room, Jesus spoke to his disciples in whispers, his own breath the Holy Spirit, and he bestowed a gift. Choose wisely. The sins you forgive will go away, and the one's you don't forgive will stay on. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive them all. Forgiveness is not the same as vindication. Forgiveness disarms the other with kindness.

And when Thomas was sad not to have been there, Jesus came back and blessed Thomas' wounds by showing him his own.

At this moment, I want more than anything to listen. I am wounded. I seek not to be ruled but to participate. I join Zoom calls with poets and prophets and philosophers, all of whom are grieving over the dismantling of our earth, God's gift to all life, by pretending it is private property to sell, develop, mine, and destroy. Entire forests and ecosystems are being crucified, people have no homes, and the noise all around us has grown so big, so chaotic, and so terrifying that there are no words to describe it.

And yet. And yet. Just as God has no enemies, neither are we really lost. If we can just be soft, go slower, and listen God *will* show us the way.

I've done too much preaching. I want to tell you a story about two different languages.

When I started my ministry at St. Aidan's Bolinas in 2014, one of the first things I did was join the small Buddhist sangha who held a monthly half-day sitting in the Sanctuary. I was at a tumultuous period in my life, and I thought meditation might help. It did more than help. As it worked to quiet and regroup the warring voices within, it awakened me to a new way of being in the world. I was not an immutable being, but a collection of concepts and opinions. Nor was the outer world as solid as it seemed. I loved the texts we read about the fluid nature of reality, the language so poetic and seemingly paradoxical that it took years of practice to even begin to understand what they were about. To this day, I can't speak Buddhist very well, but I love the line, "To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self." Because I hear Jesus saying, "Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

As almost all my fellow sangha members were lapsed Christians and I was very much an unlapsd Christian, over the years we had many a lively conversation about our respective traditions. At first, my ex Christian friends looked down upon the faith they thought to have left behind, glad that they had shed the institutionally imposed guilt, shallowness and hypocrisy behind to embrace something far more positive than miserable sinnerdom.

While acknowledging their every complaint, and even, as you've heard today, agreeing with some of them, I looked beyond institutional failings to ask deeper questions about conversion: can we ever fully leave something we have once been? Or does it shape the way we approach the new? Can we turn the noisy winds of contempt into the quiet peace of the upper room? Don't hate what you were. Transform it. We can have a more mature understanding of our lives, but we cannot pretend they didn't happen.

Just as I incorporated Buddhist teachings into my understanding of what Jesus taught, so did my very good friend and Zen priest Dan incorporate his Catholic teachings into his Buddhist life, and I was delighted this week to see that we are both walking a path of reconciliation. In July, he will be hosting a four part Zoom conversation on Catholic and Buddhist monasticism this summer and of course I was one of the first to sign up.

Jesus did not come to earth to bequeath us one more rule bound institution, although good structures are always helpful. Jesus came to teach us something much deeper than that. He came to restore our humanity, disfigured and harmed by greed, hatred and delusion. He said it was OK that we did wrong. Just don't wallow in guilt and denial. Repent. Understand. Grow. God loves you. Grow. Jesus came to make us whole. To restore wholeness to the entire earth.

Because only when we are fully human can we build a fully human world. And now you know what the Holy Spirit has been whispering into my ears this spring.

Amen.