

No Pentecost in Margaritaville

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Not so long ago Jimmy Buffet was in town to promote his new line of themed retirement communities called "Margaritaville." I'm not kidding about this. Does everybody here know who Jimmy Buffet is? I'm sure you know the song: *Wasting away again in Margaritaville/ Looking for my lost shaker of salt...*

Well, you, too, can live Margaritaville (but I can't). It's targeted towards folks who are (quote) "55 and better" seeking an "active adult community" in Daytona Beach, Florida. This is from its website: "Inspired by the legendary music and lifestyle of Jimmy Buffett, your new home in paradise features exciting recreation, unmatched dining and FINTastic nightlife." It's a \$1 billion project; 7,000 homes have been built. 10,000 applications have come in. This is a real thing.

This seems to me like a bad idea. A great business venture, sure, but a bad idea nonetheless. Oh, let me count the ways. First of all – and can I get some love from my friends in recovery – does this sound like a wise and healthy way to structure one's life? And then, I can't help but think of the poor soul who gets to be the rector of Christ Church Margaritaville. That's going to be a tough gig. You know that a preacher's mission is to comfort the afflicted & afflict the comfortable; church is about the last place in America now where that might actually happen. Well, good luck with challenging someone who's just bought a mortgage in paradise.

But the real concern I have is that we see here a drive towards places of incredible same-ness, a desire to live our lives comfortably nestled in a theme of our choosing. My real concern isn't Margaritaville itself...it's that this little village is the logical end of how our society has arranged itself, in tightly-knit bubbles of familiarity and nostalgia, where we will never be challenged, because there's nobody left inside who doesn't talk like us.

Now, you may think I'm judging a lifestyle...but if you just changed the theme and the location, perhaps dropping it right in the middle of New York City, oh I'd sign up for this too.

In the wake of what we're dealing with as a nation, of a politics that is just a mess, where we quite literally have lost the ability to speak with people with whom we disagree, I have been reading a book by Bill Bishop called *The Big Sort: Why the*

Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing us Apart. It's helped me understand a little of how we got to this point.ⁱ

Now, the book is absolutely neutral, so I'll call it safe...though it's really not safe because it will challenge your belief that you are as right as you think, that the choices you make are above the cultural fray. In the last decades, though our political races are often very tight in the final count, something below the surface has changed dramatically. Not so long ago, in the 50's, 60's and 70's, people voted differently from their own peers, even within their neighborhoods & communities. But as the decades rolled on, increasingly those same neighborhoods were each going one way or another, cities and counties were going one way or another, churches were going one way or another. So the aggregate stayed the same, but more and more districts were decided by landslides. Do you see the difference? We now live in pockets like-mindedness, insulated against difference.

Bishop points to our prosperity as a primary culprit: we've simply had the means and the ability to choose where we go, and we've responded to cultural upheaval by gravitating, ever so gradually, to our respective corners. With each move, with each church we've joined, with each house or car we've bought, tight, monolithic communities have formed. So now, when you drive through a neighborhood looking for a house, you're checking signals: What signs are in the yard? What cars...Prius or Tahoe, and what church magnets are on the back? And frankly the same thing has happened in churches....words like biblical and inclusive are both clearly good words, but in their cultural context each has a powerful sorting influence. And that is not good for the body of Christ.

But if you're like me, you want to say, what about the *true* places, the cities that have evolved over time and are organically diverse, living places of creativity and energy, where everybody is welcome? Well, it turns out that these places have also become well-sorted, in the same way that all our neighborhoods have. And worse...those wonderful, diverse, often urban places where supposedly folk are above the sort? Well, first of all, those who don't live there would disagree, but these places are also far and away the most economically segregated places in our country. That's largely because people with means have sorted in, middle class has sorted out, and poorer folk are stuck in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

As it turns out, we have all moved to Margaritaville. Yet something profound is missing. There is an emptiness in this place, a desperation, a sadness, as if Jimmy Buffet was: as if we really are just *wasting away*.

You see, there can be no Pentecost in a place like Margaritaville. We're too well-buffered, too focused on ourselves, too afraid of our shadows. That day in Jerusalem, when the disciples were gathered together, a mighty wind came from heaven, loud as a tornado, and blew all through the house, leaving it its wake tongues of fire. This was the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the gift was not complete without its proper reception, and that meant carrying it...communicating it...to the scores of people who stood outside the door – the people from all throughout the Mediterranean basin.

There was no culture of same-ness here. They were from all over the known world, and unintelligible to one another. But they weren't all that different either...they were all Jews, gathering for the festival of the Harvest. And when the disciples spoke – it wasn't in a universal gibberish but in each's own language: Egyptians, Cappadocians, Romans, Asians, Libyans all heard the gospel in their language. Conjugated properly, in their vernacular, perhaps in their own regional accents. If a North Carolinian had been there, she'd have heard the gospel in phrases like "ya'll" and "might could."

The day of Pentecost had a wonderful living complexity to it, but we've worked of late to boil that complexity right out of the mix, because we're frightened by anything we can't control. But you can't have binary left v. right arguments with 25 people all of whom speak different languages. There is nothing to spin there, because it's a communication breakdown of a whole different order.

Yet the gospel carried. The message of Jesus found its way across those impossible boundaries. The spirit spread because as different as they were, they were just close enough for the fire to catch. The tight-knit circle of disciples kindled and tended the fire with their prayers. The people of many nations caught on simply because they were drawn out of their homelands to a holy place. (They just thought they were coming for something else.)

Pentecost is the giving of the Holy Spirit, the living breath of the church. The holy spirit will take us places we cannot imagine. But without that spirit, without Pentecost, the church is dead on arrival, it is an empty husk, a broken pot. A broken pot can make a lot of noise, but it can't cook a meal.

The Holy Spirit cannot break into Margaritaville. It cannot. If we stay in our enclaves, convinced of our right-ness, sneering disdainfully at those beyond our gates, we will remain stuck. Even as we speak words of truth and justice that need to be spoken, we must also ask, are we giving voice to the spirit, or to the sort?

The onlookers sneer at the new believers, saying that they are filled “with new wine.” But that may have been exactly the right thing to call it. They were absolutely filled with a kind of new wine: the wine of charity, of beloved-ness, of grace, of new life. This wasn’t an intellectual knowing; it was a sacred *warming*. It *was* new wine! Compare this new wine to the frozen concoction that helps us hang on. *That* is the wine of nostalgia and escapism. That’s old wine – but it’s not the good kind.

Pentecost isn’t just the coming of the Holy Spirit....it’s the celebration of the giftedness of the church. God has given us something incredible. And my friends, the world hungers for it. They are there just beyond those doors, living their lives, in their own languages, but ready to taste this new wine. The question is not, are *they* ready to receive it? The question is,

Are *we*?

*Homily for the 7th Sunday of Easter, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Year A, May 28
2017, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.*

ⁱ Bishop, Bill: *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing us Apart*. Mariner: New York, 2008.