

## Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, Part 5:

### Christian Pluralism

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-13

Today is Pentecost Sunday, which is commonly understood as the birthday of the Christian Church. Today also happens to be just twelve days shy of another important birthday, at least for me. While my physical birthday is February 12<sup>th</sup>, I celebrate my metaphysical birthday on May 31<sup>st</sup>. For, on May 31, 1981, a friend and I had our own Pentecost-like experience of the Holy Spirit; an experience that resulted in me becoming a minister after never – ever – having dreamed of going into the ministry before.

Contrary to my usual practice of keeping quiet about my experience for several months, or even years, after meeting new people, I preached about this experience shortly after arriving here last December. Instead of repeating the story, I've attached it to the end of this sermon if you missed it then or want to refresh your memory. I'll just offer the briefest thumbnail here:

Like the disciples on Pentecost, what my friend and I experienced came on quite suddenly and unforgettably. It was an overwhelming experience of wave after wave of love that kept increasing until they reached unimaginable proportions and blotted out any sense of time, place, or separation between God and ourselves. As you may imagine, the experience provoked profound joy in both of us – even ecstasy unlike anything we'd ever experienced – all without the use of drugs or alcohol. It totally altered the whole course of both our lives and convinced us that three things are absolutely true:

- (1) There really is a God!
- (2) This God is not only aware of us, but far more aware of us than we're aware of us.
- (3) Because of this awareness – and despite it – this God loves each and every one of us, without a single exception, beyond our wildest imagination. Always has. Always will.

When our brief mystical encounter subsided that night in 1981 and we had a chance to reflect on its meaning and significance, we also realized just how far we all are from God normally in this life, even at our best moments. Our mind-blowing experience of God did not suddenly turn us into saints. If anything, we felt our separation from God more acutely than ever before, having tasted what it is really like to be fully in God's Presence. Eventually, I came to realize that salvation is not simply about believing in Jesus and receiving a "get out of hell free card." In a very real way, we are *already* in hell – at least a form of it. Yet heaven is also present in this life.

My definition of salvation changed, therefore, in light of my experience. To me, **salvation is discovering that you, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination and**

**determining to re-orient your life around this discovery.** The more our lives reflect this Reality, the more we experience God's heaven amidst the world's hell.

Pentecost Sunday is considered the birthday of the Christian Church precisely because the disciples experienced this same kind of overwhelming love and became convinced that people could be saved from the hell of *this* life by discovering God's immeasurable love for them and reorienting their lives around this Reality. This is why, for instance, the apostle Paul never speaks of hell as an eternal, afterlife reality in his biblical writings, even as he speaks plenty about the hell we experience in *this* realm and how to experience heaven in *the now* by surrendering to God's love and grace.

In light of the experience and mission of Pentecost, you might wonder why I call myself a "Christian Pluralist." A Christian Pluralist is, someone who "embraces fully the path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths God may create for humanity." On the surface, it might seem that I don't believe in spreading the Good News of Jesus throughout the world, like the disciples did, if there are many paths to God instead of just one.

I assure you: I do believe there is just one path to God – the path of love and grace. I just happen to have witnessed too many examples of people who call God by different names who are obviously receiving and responding to God's love and grace, and being instruments of this love and grace throughout the world. So, while I fervently believe in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to anyone who wants to hear it, I also know that the field of God's Realm is being ploughed and harvested by more than just Christians. God's love and grace is far larger than any religious system may contain. What else would you expect from a supremely loving God who seeks to save us from this world's hell?

Pentecost shows us that the Good News of Jesus Christ is a lot more than just news. It's about an *experience* of God's love and grace. The *message* will only get you so far. You can hear it repeated all day long, but until you actually experience God's love and grace for yourself, you will never really believe it to be true, and it certainly won't convert your heart. The heart demands not words, but direct experience, before it changes.

In other words, the message of Jesus merely points a person in the direction of God. It tells them to look in the direction of extravagant love and truly amazing grace. This in itself is significant, as there are lots of false "gods" in our world that have nothing to do with love and grace – "gods" of Greed, Envy, and the Pursuit of Public Admiration, for instance. So, knowing in what direction to look for the True God is quite helpful! But it still can't compare to an actual encounter with God's love and grace.

Human relationships provide a helpful analogy in this regard. Have you ever fallen deeply in love with someone in a way that has led to an authentic, lasting relationship? If so, did this bond occur based solely on someone's claim that they love and adore you? Or, did it happen as the result of a direct experience of this person's love?

Yes, words matter. But not nearly so much as experiences.

If this is the case with human relationships, why would it be any different in a relationship with God? No one converts in any authentic or lasting way as the result of hearing the Good News of God's love and grace. They convert when they experience it for themselves.

So, when Christians claim that *belief* in Jesus as Lord and Savior is required for God to love you, they have it turned exactly around. Outside of direct experience, the story of Jesus is, well, just a story. Belief follows experience. Apart from direct experience, we may nominally believe in God's love and grace – at least when life is going well for us. Yet, when life heads south on us, our beliefs quickly crumble unless we have direct experiences to back them up.

When the Holy Spirit came upon Christ's disciples on Pentecost Sunday, it filled them with direct experience of being loved beyond their wildest imagination. This experience filled them with so much joy that onlookers speculated that they were drunk. It convinced them that God's love and grace were not only real, but should be offered to others as extravagantly as they had received it.

When fellow Jews, and eventually scores of pagans, began converting to Christianity, it was not because Christians shared a convincing story with them. It was because they experienced such extravagant love from Christ's disciples that they wanted to know where it came from. When they were told where it came from, they sought it out themselves. And found it.

Love converts the human heart to God, not mere beliefs. As the apostle Paul says, "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:2)

So what point am I making, you ask? The point is that *all* love comes from God, not just love from those who happen to believe certain things about Jesus. Love that passes through a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or even an atheist, is the same Love that passes through a Christian. Did you honestly believe that there is "Christian" love and "non-Christian" love? All love comes directly from God.

Thus, all love conveys a direct *experience* of God. The Good News is that, if you seek an experience of God, you don't need to sit for years meditating on a mountain top waiting for God to come to you. A God-experience can be readily conveyed through another human being.

Before moving on, I invite you to take a couple minutes to consider your own experiences of God's love. What percentage would you say have come directly from God without being mediated through another human being? (Perhaps they were mediated through Nature, for instance.) Then consider what percentage of God's love and grace has come to you through others. Is it any wonder that when Jesus said that the most important commandment is to love God with heart, soul, and strength, he also said there is another very much like it – to love our neighbor as ourselves? When we love our neighbor, we mediate an experience of the Divine!

## **II. The Form God Takes**

On the rare occasions when I have shared my Pentecost experience with people, I have often had the sense that those who have not had as extraordinary of an experience as I had feel like they are at a disadvantage when it comes to faith. Yet, the fact of the matter is that the only advantage I have – and I’ve had nearly 43 years to reflect on this – is that it is abundantly clear that even the smallest experiences of love are connected intrinsically to the fullest experiences. This is why hardly a day has gone by since 1981 that I haven’t remembered my experience. Every single experience of love, from you or anyone else, feels like an extension of my personal Pentecost experience. It may be less intense, but it’s a God experience nonetheless. There is no such thing as a little bit of God and a lot of God, just as there’s no such thing as a little bit of you or a lot of you. There’s just God, and not-God; you, and not-you.

Bottom line, I’ve come to realize that God takes whatever form that love takes. There are therefore as many paths to God as there are experiences of love.

If you want to know whether or not you are “saved” in the way that Christians often speak of salvation – as in being saved from hell – just ask yourself, “When is the last time I either received authentic love from someone, or expressed such love toward another?” Given or received, all experiences of love are God experiences. If you have received love, it means that you have received God. If you offer love to others, it means that you have not only received God into your heart, but the love within you has grown to the point where your “cup runneth over,” and God’s love is now working in and through you. Would God send such a person to hell?

If you haven’t received or given love lately, even then you shouldn’t be wondering whether or not you’ll go to hell when you die. You should wonder how much hell you are willing to experience in this life before you finally let down your guard enough to receive love – love directly from God, and God’s love mediated through others.

God’s love stands at the doorway of your heart, knocking, patiently waiting for you to open the door and let it in. God’s love is also sitting somewhere in your vicinity right now – perhaps right beside you in the form of a fellow worshipper. If you’re having a hard time perceiving love knocking at your inner door, or experiencing God’s love mediated through others, then there’s always one surefire way to experience God’s love: by offering love to others. Your next opportunity to do so may be as close as the person sitting next to you.

This is what the message of Pentecost is really all about. It is also why I call myself a Christian Pluralist – one who “embraces fully the path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths God may create for humanity.” God takes whatever form love takes. Therefore, God most certainly took the form of Jesus Christ. And when you or I experience love mediated through those of other faiths – our Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, and other neighbors – we can be assured that the very God who was present in Jesus is also present in them. And they have received this love deeply enough that their cup overflows, too, spreading experiences of God out into the world.

The sign of a Christian who is truly *Christian* is extravagant love. The sign of a church that is truly *Christian* is extravagant love. This is also the sign of any person or community that is

connected to the God we've come to know in Jesus. Pentecost tells us a story of God's extravagant love flowing out far beyond traditional boundaries into the world. Those who continue to offer extravagant love make this story a continuing *Reality*.

### **ADDENDUM – My 1981 “Pentecost” Experience**

Before May 31, 1981, I dreamt of becoming a solar energy research scientist. I had never before considered becoming a minister. What propelled me into the ministry was a firsthand experience of God's love and grace that was so vast and overwhelming that it became perfectly clear that it includes literally all people, without exception – including me.

I was just finishing my junior year in high school. I had a friend named Becky (not her real name) who was going through a very difficult situation. One day, as she was walking home along a dimly lit road at dusk, someone in a ski mask tried to assault her. Somehow, she managed to struggle free and flee physically unharmed. I say *physically* unharmed. *Emotionally* she struggled quite a lot, especially since it happened in her neighborhood. She had no idea who the perpetrator was.

Adding to her distress, she had only two weeks earlier been visiting her grandfather in the hospital who was undergoing cancer treatment. Her grandfather's immune system had been compromised so the hospital was only allowing close family to visit, and then only if completely healthy.

The morning after Becky visited her grandfather she woke up with a terrible sore throat. A couple days later her grandfather fell ill and died. In Becky's mind, she had killed her grandfather! She was wracked with guilt.

One evening we were at my home talking about all this. I told her that six months earlier I had discovered a powerful way to deal productively with my own struggles. I told her I'd learned to pray. Specifically, I'd learned how to pray in a way that didn't simply offer your laundry list to God and expect everything would come out alright. I had learned to be silent, to simply dwell in God's presence, and let whatever happens happen.

That got us into a deep conversation about God that lasted well into the evening. My mother finally came into the living room and told me it was time to take Becky home. We drove to her house and parked outside still deep in conversation. At one point while Becky was speaking a thought entered my head. It concerned her grandfather and the guilt she was feeling about him. The thought was simple: “Tell Becky, ‘It's okay.’”

We weren't talking about her grandfather at the moment so I let the thought go and continued to listen. The thought came back: “Tell Becky ‘It's okay.’” I didn't. The thought returned several more times. Each time I pushed it out of my mind and continued listening. The thought became more insistent: “Tell Becky ‘It's okay!’” Finally, I could hardly concentrate on anything but this thought. It had grown so strong I was even picturing her grandfather in my mind saying this over and over. So, I broke in and, feeling rather stupid, said, “Becky, there's something I think I'm supposed to tell you with respect to your grandfather: *It's okay.*”

What happened next defies explanation. In fact, though I have tried at certain times in the last forty-two years to describe it logically, I still can find no better way to describe accurately what happened than to speak in metaphor. Bear in mind that what I'm about to tell you *did not literally happen this way*, but speaking in metaphors gets more to the point than anything I can describe through other means:

It was like a giant explosion suddenly took place. The car filled with the light of ten thousand suns. Time utterly stopped in its tracks and we were filled with the greatest sense of God's presence and love we'd ever experienced. God was right there. In the car! Only, there was no longer any "there" or "car." There wasn't really even an "us." There was only Infinity and infinity was LOVE. This love was fully aware of who we were, aware of everything we'd ever done or left undone, aware of every cell and molecule in our bodies, aware of every breath. The love was so intense that if we were to add up all the love we'd ever experienced in our entire lives and multiplied it a thousand times it would still amount to little more than a tiny sliver of the love we experienced. We felt this love for ourselves, and for all people. *All* people, no matter who they were, loved beyond their wildest imagination. We wept uncontrollably at the majesty of the awareness. At the awe and wonder of it all.

How long did this experience last? I wouldn't have a clue if I had not looked at the clock on the dashboard after the dust settled a bit and the awareness subsided. It was 11:30 pm. The last time I'd noticed the time before the encounter, it was 11:00 pm. If there had been no clock, I wouldn't have been able to tell you even moments after the experience whether it lasted a minute or several hours.

We sat back in our seats, mostly in silence, for the better part of an hour trying to catch our breath. "What on earth just happened?" Becky asked. "I have no idea." Our heads were spinning. Our hearts were pounding so fast you'd swear we'd just run a marathon.

Eventually, Becky got out of the car and I drove home in a daze. Upon arrival, I went into my parent's bedroom to tell them I'd returned, as was the custom. They were asleep. I woke up my mother saying, "Mom, I've just had an intense spiritual experience with Becky." She mumbled something incomprehensible and I left the room. A few minutes later there was a knock on my bedroom door. My mother entered asking, "What did you just say?!"

The rest, as they say, is history.