

# **“Can You Make It a Habit to Think that Way” by Brenda S.**

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## **Pentecost**

It has been a terrifying and strange time for the followers of Jesus. Their leader was treated as a criminal and crucified. Peter, supposedly one of Jesus' staunchest followers, succumbed to fear and denied even knowing Jesus and they all hid, not knowing what was going to happen to them next. They had suffered a tremendous loss and undoubtedly felt abandoned. Then Jesus appeared to the women at the tomb and then to the disciples and he walked and talked and ate with them, but only for a short while and then as Luke says, "in the act of blessing, he parted from them."

After the crucifixion the Apostles and the followers of Jesus had maintained a pretty low profile. They met in rooms, they prayed a lot, but they were not going out into the streets healing people or drawing great crowds, or calling attention to themselves. No, they were keeping quiet, and even after Jesus' resurrection there are no reports of large gatherings of Jesus' followers; rather it was smaller, more intimate groups who came together.

And who were Jesus' followers at this time? Well, it seems pretty clear that most if not all of these followers, including the Apostles, were Galileans. And Galileans evidently were nothing too special since they seem to be the brunt of many disparaging remarks by other more sophisticated Jews from other places. At this time we know that there were at least 120 followers of Jesus since we are told that number gathered when they chose Matthias to replace Judas as an apostle.

It is now Pentecost, the Greek word for the Festival of Weeks, or harvest festival which was celebrated by Jews on the 50<sup>th</sup> day

(pentekoste) after Passover. This is one of the three important festivals in the Jewish calendar and all male Jews were required to come to Jerusalem, so there were large crowds from all over filling up the inns and camping in the surrounding areas around Jerusalem. On this day, while Jesus' followers were gathered, suddenly there is a noise like a driving wind in the room and tongues of fire appear and rest on each of them and the Holy Spirit filled them and they began to speak in other tongues, "... as the Spirit gave them power of utterance."

I have to say that as an interpreter it is gratifying to see that the Holy Spirit's first work is to create interpreters so everyone can hear the Good News in their own language, but I think we miss the point if we concentrate only on that idea.

Rather the most amazing thing that has happened is that these followers of Christ have finally left their rooms and have began speaking in public before crowds of people and suddenly the Word, the Good News is being disseminated beyond this little group of Galileans to people in Jerusalem and out into most of the known world. The list of those present and who heard the Apostles include people from Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Italy, Greece, Crete and Arabia and probably more. And not only that, Peter directly addresses the crowd inviting Jews, and all who live in Jerusalem to listen; quoting Joel he talks about how this is the fulfillment of the prophecy: "In the last days...your sons and daughters will prophesy," he says, creating an inclusive invitation to all who were gathered to listen and to be heard. And then, he, who once denied even knowing Jesus, now proclaims him to be the Messiah.

This sudden opening, of sharing the Good News with others from many parts of the world, must have been unsettling and stretched them in ways they could never have imagined. Not only were they dealing with people who had never known Jesus and did not have the benefit of listening to him or learning from him directly, the listeners were from many different parts of the world, and although Jewish, they had different values and cultures as well. Can you imagine the chaos of assimilating 3,000 people into a tiny congregation of 120? But that is what happened at Pentecost.

For me, the story of Pentecost isn't so much about the wind and the fire and the speaking in tongues, but rather it is this dramatic change, the sudden courage, and the authority with which Peter and the others spoke that seems to be the essence of this story. Because at Pentecost something profoundly changed: At Pentecost this little band of followers, who no one gave much credence to, who were hiding out in rooms, uncertain of their future was reborn and empowered by the Spirit in some inexplicable way. In that moment the seeds that would change the world were planted and it is because of those very seeds planted over 2000 years ago that we are gathered in our own room here this morning.

Thomas Cahill, in his book Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus, <http://brendasbookshelf.wordpress.com/2014/04/18/the-desire-of-the-everlasting-hills-the-world-before-and-after-jesus-by-thomas-cahill/> talks about the impact of Jesus and on history:

“Traditions are born,” says Chaim Potok in *My Name is Asher Lev*, “by the power of an initial thrust that hurls ideas and acts across the centuries.” In the case of Christianity, these acts and ideas have often been misidentified. This is because the radical society of friends of free and equal men and women that came forth from the side of the crucified was quickly overwhelmed by ancient patriarchy and has been overwhelmed in every era since by the social and political forms of the age... But the “ideas and acts” have been hurled across the centuries; and whenever an individual or gathering has had the courage to confront the Gospel anew, the society of its time has experienced transformation. When the apostles and martyrs were gone and Christianity had compromised itself by becoming part and parcel of the Roman state, some men and women remembered the desert of the Jews and sought it out as the natural place for a meeting with God. These hermits and anchorites became the first Christian monks and nuns, purifying a religion that would otherwise have devolved into mere political appendage and social decoration, not unlike its cultic pagan predecessors. But the desert people

rediscovered the earth-shattering encounter with God that had occupied the lives of figures from Abraham to Paul; and gave the West a consistent tradition of spirituality and mysticism. When the medieval papacy was growing into the most splendid irreligious despotism the world had ever known, a young man whose fun loving friends called him "Francesco" stripped himself naked in the public square of Assisi in Umbria and dedicated his life to Christ's poor, definitively separating true religion from pomp of any kind and giving the Western world a conscience it can never quite get rid of. When in the late seventeenth century George Fox and his fellow Quakers began to read the gospels, Acts and the letters of Paul, it seemed to them as if no one had ever read them before, for they rediscovered there the blueprint for Christianity as the radical "society of friends" it had once been and the theological courage to oppose slavery, prisons, capital punishment, war and even the unholy union of church and state. Throughout the history of the West, since the time of Jesus, there has remained just enough of the substance of the original Gospel, a residuum, for it to be passed, as it were, from hand to hand and used like stock, to strengthen, flavor and invigorate new movements that have succeeded again and again if only for a time- in producing *alteri Christi*, men and women in danger of crucifixion. It has also produced, repeatedly and in the oddest circumstances, the loving kindness of the first Christians.

Passed from hand to hand we now are holding that residuum, the stock from that message that long ago Peter had the courage to step forward and proclaim at Pentecost. Christ is risen, and he is here among us.

Recently, Ladd, a classmate of Keith's and mine from our high school in Japan sent out the second edition of a survey he created called "Growing up Gaijin" Gaijin for those of you who don't know means foreigner or literally "outside person" and it was the label we were given while living in Japan, often by school children who would point and yell, "It's a Gaijin, It's a Gaijin" and then run away as if we were terrifying monsters. Because of our unique experiences growing up in the 60's and 70's in Japan, a survey was a great way to compile

those experiences and see what had shaped and influenced us to become who we are today. The survey is long and comprehensive; and Ladd patiently compiled the results and did a statistical analysis as well. What was interesting to me however were the stories that came out, the additions and explanations that people added to their answers and the range of feelings about our experiences in Japan. Some felt that their experiences were wonderful and affirmed their parents' missionary efforts even though it meant living overseas and often living in dorms away from home. Others felt that the negatives they experienced in living abroad and away from home were so dysfunctional and damaging that they wished their parents had not been missionaries. There were those who questioned the very idea of missionaries and those who, now missionaries themselves, recognized mistakes made in the past but felt God's call and believe that God is using them in their work overseas.

At 50 some years old, our experiences in Japan are still shaping us and we are still working with the impact it has had on us. I was struck over and over again how diverse our experiences were and shocked by how much pain some experienced while in Japan. I feel badly that I was so blind and did not see the suffering of those around me and wonder how I might have even contributed to that suffering, if by nothing else than my own ignorance and self absorption.

The brokenness of the world is all around us and is pervasive. In our attempts to heal, we often cause pain. In our efforts to create something better, we often alienate and hurt the very people we are trying to help. In our efforts to teach, we often are ignorant. And in our efforts to love we are often hateful.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he says, "Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs...for in one Spirit we were all brought together in one body by baptism, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free; we were all given that one Spirit to drink."

The body metaphor is an interesting one. As I grow older I realize how extremely interrelated my bodies is. If just one thing hurts it causes a ripple effect throughout my body, causing me to compensate in a variety of ways. Pain and suffering are the ways that our bodies let

us know that something is not right, that healing needs to take place and that we need to focus our attention there. Diversity is also what makes the body work and function. Our eyes and ears and arms and legs all perform different functions and serve the different needs of the body as a whole and without that diversity we would not be a body at all.

So I believe that it was no accident when the spirit came upon Jesus' followers at Pentecost- a time when there was a huge diversity of people present in Jerusalem. It was no accident that the first action of the Spirit was an act of inclusion in the midst of that diversity, of creating an opportunity for people to hear and understand in their own language the Good News. It was no accident that Peter's first response was to remember Joel's promise of a time when men and women would prophecy again inviting men and women to be witnesses to the Spirit among them.

It was no accident and I believe that, or do I? ...

In the book [The Translator](http://brendasbookshelf.wordpress.com/2014/01/10/the-translator-by-nina-schuyler/), by Nina Schuyler, <http://brendasbookshelf.wordpress.com/2014/01/10/the-translator-by-nina-schuyler/> the main character wakes up after an accident and can no longer speak English, only Japanese. The doctors suspect that her fall has affected her ability to access her English abilities but eventually she should get back her ability to speak English. [Finding this inability to communicate challenging and alienating, she does the only thing that makes sense-she goes to Japan. There she has a conversation with someone who gives her some words of advice and she asks "Do you believe that?" and he responds, "If by believe you mean am I in the habit of thinking this way, then yes I believe."](http://brendasbookshelf.wordpress.com/2014/01/10/the-translator-by-nina-schuyler/)

When I think about that small group of Galileans and what they had gone through it seems remarkable to me that this Good News about Jesus was not lost or abandoned. But it was not lost and it was not abandoned because God is a God of Diversity. The Psalmist reminds us of that in Psalm 104, that God is the creator of "countless things, and "...here in the vast and immeasurable sea there are...crawling things beyond number." The very nature of Creation is diversity.

And so on that day of Pentecost when Jerusalem was filled with such diversity, God's spirit moved and the message of Jesus spilled over into new ears and new hearts. But the story does not end there. The Gospel message went beyond its Jewish roots and embraced those outsiders, those gaijin, if you will, and the message spread even further. In that diversity God's spirit began to work and new voices emerged that brought hope and could see clearly the suffering of others. It is in the diversity of our calls and gifts and vision that the spirit moves giving voice to those in pain, in need or suffering. It is when individuals within the body of Christ share their own suffering and those of others that we can become aware of the ways in which the Body is being hurtful or blind and can change course. It is in the diversity of our experience that we become more attuned to the ways that God is working among us.

WE are the body of Christ, we are broken, we are often blind, we make mistakes, but if we listen to each other, if we hear those other voices that speak our language, if we make it a habit to think that not everyone thinks or responds to God in the same way, If we can embrace the "gaijin," the other, the diversity that is God's gift to us, then we can be more fully the Body of Christ.

We are gathered in this room just like the Galileans were more than 2,000 years ago. We now hold the residuum of the "ideas and acts" that were hurled forth at Pentecost. The Spirit of God is upon us. Can we, like them, leave this room? Do you believe that the Body of Christ, that you and me sitting here in this room, broken and whole all at once, can make a difference in this broken world?

Can you make it a habit to think that way?

Amen.