

Pentecost
June 5, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21
Romans 8:14-17

I believe I am safe to say that something is deeply wrong in this nation. Whether Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, cisgendered or queer, young or old, we feel something isn't right. Is it anxiety? Are we falling apart at the seams? Do we feel bereft because of diminished prestige and power? Are we lost? Privately we probably describe contemporary American life with more colorful phrases.

We see things that don't make sense like an 18-year-old who can buy an AR-15, but can't buy beer. Or that we have people who push to ban abortions under the banner of pro-life but won't support more generous support for young families with children living in poverty.

Politicians and political commentators no longer self-censor themselves when they barely veil their racism. Yet, gay and lesbian teachers in some jurisdictions need to self-censor themselves when students ask them about their personal lives.

Parents hound their local school and public libraries to remove books from the shelves that deal with honestly with race because their children will feel guilty and books on sexuality because their children will "become" gay.

Then, there's this pandemic. Face masks signal political affiliation more than concerns about public health.

We have more guns in this nation than people. Most people are one illness or injury away from bankruptcy. Politicians say we must address mental illness to end mass shootings, but they don't commit any money to fund mental health.

We can probably spend the next few hours naming all that seems wrong in this nation. My intention, though, is not to make this a laundry list of ills.

On Tuesday, I read an article in the **New York Times** which attempted to address what is currently making life seem so unsettling. The article began with a chaplain who told a Buddhist parable about a man who was shot with a poisoned arrow. The man demanded to know who shot the arrow, the kind of arrow, the poison on the arrow, and the source of the feathers on the arrow. The Buddhist response was “remove the arrow and dress the wound.”¹

We can look to gun violence. We can point to racism. We can blame technology run amok. Those and others, however, are presenting issues of a deeper malady.

Over the past few months, I’ve been rolling around in my head what I believe is our poisoned arrow. What ties these seemingly disparate parts together? How do we connect the dots?

My bumper sticker explanation is fear. Fear has been building for decades. Forty or fifty years ago, we could make sense of life. Not that life didn’t come with some difficulties, like the gas crisis in the late 1970s shocking us when gas hit \$0.35 a gallon. We were impotent during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980. Despite that, we had a “Leave It to Beaver” life, where we, like the Beaver, would mess up and then have it resolved by the wise father figure, Ward Cleaver.

Things changed in America as white men had to make room for women and people of color at the table. Things changed as American manufacturing fell behind the rest of the world. I remember the anger directed at Asians as excellent quality Japanese automobiles gained share in the American market. Things changed as globalization encouraged companies to move their

¹ Elizabeth Dias. The Arrow in America’s Heart. The New York Times. May 31, 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/us/america-life-uvalde-covid.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=US%20News>

operations to lower cost countries, which hollowed out many thriving communities. Things changed as immigration brought people from countries outside of western Europe, which changed the mix of businesses on Main Street. Things changed as climate change brought more intense storms, coastal flooding, and wildfires. Things changed as income inequality made the economy's winners and losers more dramatically noticeable as the losing population grew. As things changed, easy resolution became difficult. Ward didn't have the answers.

Life became less black and white and more grey. Sexuality shifted from its binary biological understanding of man and woman to a fluid social understanding of sexual and gender self-identification. Post-modernism questioned authority, leading people to ask, "What is truth?" Is there anything that is certain?

What is certain is our ability to control our lives. Our only way to be assured of anything in our lives is to have control. People who have different skin color, different customs, and different languages pose an uncertain factor in our lives. With being one serious illness away from poverty, we must protect what financial interests we have. Technology could make many jobs disappear tomorrow. We must protect our homes from looting after they're destroyed in the next storm or marauders from outside our communities. We must, then, have control by whatever means to preserve what we have. Not having control leads to fear.

Except believing we have control has always been a fiction. Believing in the "Leave It to Beaver" life was a fiction, too, especially for people who were not white, straight, and middle class. Believing that life was black and white where Ward could neatly resolve our dilemmas was a fiction, too.

Life was always uncertain. Life is uncertain. Life will always be uncertain. If we need any proof, look at the pandemic.

Jesus told the disciples before he ascended, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” (Acts 1:8a) They, however, had no idea what was to come. They held together for ten days before they witnessed the Holy Spirit that morning in Jerusalem. Peter, who denied Jesus’ three times several weeks before, boldly proclaimed that their prophecies, visions, and dreams would come. Embracing the ways of Jesus would free the people from the stultifying oppression of Roman peace, a peace maintained in fear, for God’s liberating peace, a peace maintained in love. By the end of that day 3000 people became part of the Jesus movement.

The movement grew dramatically in subsequent years because people saw its possibility to realize their visions and dreams for a truly just world. The Jesus movement prescribed kindness, compassion, gratitude, generosity, humility, the hallmarks of a radically, inclusive practice of love. The movement taught that we must be honest with each other and ourselves. The movement preached the common good over the unfettered freedoms of the individual and proclaimed God’s abundance in contrast to scarcity. True peace and freedom rested upon God’s ways, not our ways. Finding that peace and freedom meant following Jesus’ teachings and trusting in the Holy Spirit’s movement among us, in us, and through us.

Frankly, that’s hard. Trusting the Holy Spirit means accepting our inability to control our world. The people that morning witnessed a clear demonstration of the Spirit’s power. Dictating sexual and gender identity is futile. Banning books on sexuality and racism is denialism. Believing a gun will ensure personal safety is a self-gratifying delusion. Defining who belongs in our community is to ignore the gospel’s fundamental message. Our “wokeness” is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. God has awakened us to systemic racism and sexual identity. God has awakened us to the detrimental effects of gross income disparity and the fallout from

technology's advancement. God has awakened us to the toll we have exacted upon Creation. All of this, however, is nothing new. It was always present.

It's unsettling now because the steady shifts and changes over the past few decades have accelerated and coalesced into an almost perfect storm today. We're like the man with the poisoned arrow trying to figure out the arrow rather than removing it and dressing the wound.

The poisoned arrow is fear. By removing it, we can address these other issues less reactively and more thoughtfully. Our ability to control is a fiction. Resolution will take time. It will test our patience. It will demand that we listen to each other. It will call us to acknowledge that certainty can be elusive. We must accept that change is ongoing and inevitable. We must let the Holy Spirit lead and guide us to respond in love as actions. Doing so offers hope that the visions and dreams for a world of true justice and peace, shalom, God's kingdom, is possible.