

There is one thing that our reading from the book of Acts makes perfectly clear: Speaking in tongues is a sure sign of receiving the Holy Spirit. Some would argue that it is the only true sign. If one does not speak in tongues, one is not saved. Fortunately, that is a minority opinion. While there are exceptions, for the most part, we Episcopalians eschew speaking in tongues. The occasional Latin anthem is fine, but otherwise, we'll stick with what we know, thank you very much. The more (*pause*) energetic church practices are generally not for us.

And that's okay. I don't mind if others feel like speaking in tongues or other spiritual gifts is an important part of the way they do church, their "ecclesiology" as it is known. They have their way and we have ours. At the heart of it, there is considerable overlap in fundamental beliefs, even if the outward appearance is different. There is nothing wrong with people worshiping God in different ways. The problem comes when one group insists that their way is the only true way to do it. Some folks like praise bands and big screens. Others prefer organs and hymnals. Some like fog machines, other, incense – the original fog machine. Different is not the same thing as wrong.

"The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." Astounded. God could pour out the Holy Spirit on *Gentiles?! Who woulda thunk it? Amazingly enough, God can pour out God's Spirit on anyone God chooses. Why should we be astounded by that? God is bigger than all of us. God is bigger than any one church, any one denomination. Now, I happen to think the Anglican way of doing things is best, but that doesn't mean we have all the answers. Who are we to think that we have God all figured out?*

But that was one of the problems in the early church. There were those who thought they had God all figured out. For centuries, we have known what God wants and how God wants things to be. How can you go changing things? But the experience of the Lord Jesus Christ changed things. More than that, it transformed things. The real irony is that it wasn't really a change at all. It had been there all along. All the Law and the Prophets, all of the sacred texts had pointed to Jesus and his saving work. Folks just didn't understand what it all meant. They thought too small. They made God too small. But – to paraphrase Monty Python – God is very, very big, and we are very, very small. The idea that God should fit into any box we construct is ludicrous.

So when is something new a deeper understanding of what God intended all along and was just waiting until we could handle it and what is heresy, a false teaching that ultimately diminishes our understanding of God and leads us astray? One way to look at it is to break it down into three broad categories: dogma, doctrine, and discipline. Sorry, I couldn't help the alliteration. Dogmas are the defining beliefs of Christianity. They are what distinguish our understanding of God from other religions. The Holy Trinity and the Incarnation are the two big daddies here, although some folks would make a case for others.

Doctrines tend to be means of explaining dogmas. The various doctrines are what distinguish denominations. We believe there is nothing wrong with infant baptism. Other Christians do not think it is appropriate. We understand the Bible to be inspired by God but written by human beings. Others see the Bible as being the inerrant word. Some groups see the creeds as being important; others reject what they consider to be “man made things.” Similarly, the individual practices of churches, the discipline of a church, tend to separate us. Should we use wine at communion? How often should we have communion? Who should be allowed to receive communion?

St. Augustine is quoted as having said, “In essentials unity; in non-essentials charity; in all things love.” That's really nice, Augie, but how are we supposed to know what is essential? It all gets to be very meta, as they say. We can't discuss the answers because we can't even agree on the questions. It's no wonder that there are over 40,000 Christian denominations in the world today. Of course, that in itself is what makes the third part of Augustine's statement so important: In all things, love.

Now my sermon last week was all about the love, so I don't want to bore you with the same stuff two weeks in a row. If you didn't catch it last week, you can read it on our website, www.stjamesgreenville.com. But it is worth repeating that our Lord's command to us was to love one another. And as St. Paul reminded the Corinthians, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” If we are going to “speak the truth in love,” we need to make sure that we remember what love is. Love should never be used to hurt someone.

I am the least ooey-gooey, sentimentalist person around. I can do touchy-feely, but it's not the default. Still, I preach the love. Because love is not just touchy-feely in nature. In the words of the band D.C. Talk, “love is a verb.” To love someone is not just about disposition toward them, but what we do. Our Lord did not tell us, “No one has greater love than this, to correct what I see as flaws in your doctrine and discipline.” No, it was “to lay down one's life for one's friends.” He meant literal death in his case. And it can mean literal death for some of us. But it definitely means putting others needs ahead of ours for all of us. Putting aside our need to be right in favor of the need for community.

It really comes down to humility. The humility to admit we could be wrong about something. It doesn't mean that we have to change our views, but it does mean being charitable with others whose views are different. Different and wrong aren't synonyms. Is it really possible to disagree about something without thinking the other person is wrong? Yes. It's not easy, but it's possible. If we have love. And a whole lot of God's grace. But there is no end to that.

Last week at our House Church service – which was awesome, by the way – we used a service form a supplemental liturgy called *Enriching Our Worship*. I want to close my homily today by

sharing a prayer credited to Anselm of Canterbury that we used for our hymn of praise last week, both because it is Mothers' Day and because it speaks beautifully of Christ's love. It was written over a thousand years ago.

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you; *
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
Often you weep over our sins and our pride, *
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds, *
in sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying, we are born to new life; *
by your anguish and labor we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness; *
through your gentleness, we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead, *
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us; *
in your love and tenderness, remake us.
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness, *
for the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.