

What the Spirit makes possible (Acts 2:1-21)

We need each other—and we can reach for each other.

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Our college recently held a town hall meeting to discuss issues of racial tension on our campus. The meeting was productive, albeit painful, and it opened up more opportunities for conversation.

I'm the college chaplain, and I gather every Sunday with a group of students at our college's Presbyterian House. The Sunday after the town hall, we discussed our community's race relations. The students of color spoke up, frustrated and angry, about what was left unsaid at the town hall and the issues they felt they couldn't address in that setting. They also shared their distrust of our college to do anything more about the problem than talk. One student said, "Yeah, it's like all we ever do is refer these problems to a committee, and committees are where everything goes to die."

As I listened, I fought off my white instinct to respond defensively and deflect the anger my students of color were sharing. It was an uncomfortable conversation. It was also a good one, because we didn't give up on each other.

I hadn't planned it this way, but a reading I had prepped to share after this conversation turned into a perfect segue. I passed out copies of Brian Doyle's short essay "Leap," along with a trigger warning that it is a difficult piece to read about the tragedy of September 11. In the essay, Doyle focuses on a couple who leaped

from the south tower, hand in hand. About this scene, Doyle writes:

Their hands reaching and joining is the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful. It is everything that we are capable of against horror and loss and death. It is what makes me believe that we are not craven fools and charlatans to believe in God, to believe that human beings have greatness and holiness within them like seeds that open only under great fires, to believe that some unimaginable essence of who we are persists past the dissolution of what we were, to believe against evil hourly evidence that love is why we are here.

After our conversation about the town hall, Doyle's words spoke to us—not only about our need for each other but about our God-given ability to reach for each other.

When Peter quotes the prophet Joel at the end of this reading from Acts, he paints a picture of Pentecost as a salvation story. Salvation here is more than a vague promise of eternal life. Salvation turns us toward each other, toward real life and real lives. The miracle of Pentecost reveals a diverse community—women and men from the first community of Christians along with immigrants living in Jerusalem who had come “from every nation under heaven”—listening to each other, understanding each other, reaching for each other as the Holy Spirit gives them ability.

It's a miracle of community that is possible for us all—because, as Doyle writes, “love is why we are here.”