

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

June 8, 2025

Thought Terminating Exercises

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've shared with you before my opinion on rhetoric. It is an incredibly valuable skill that is not emphasized enough in modern education. This is a problem when leaders use rhetoric to manipulate people all the time. You are not immune to rhetoric...you are not immune to propaganda! So please take some time to learn common rhetorical techniques, and maybe you won't fall for them as easily.

I bring all this up because we have a common rhetorical technique being employed against the disciples in our reading from Acts this morning. Did you catch it? My sermon title should give you a hint. In response to the miracle of tongues, Acts 2:13 informs us that "others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" This is what's known as a thought terminating exercise. It's not a common enough phrase to call it a thought terminating cliché, which is the more common use, but it functions the same.

I am certain that you've heard plenty of these thought terminating clichés over the years. Here are some of the most popular: "It's not a big deal." "We've always done it that way." "Don't rock the boat." "It's just a matter of opinion." "Agree to disagree." "Stop being so sensitive." And a particularly frustrating one for me, "It is what it is."

Whether it's a well-worn cliché or a sneering, "They must be drunk;" the aim is to stop any further discussion or interaction. Or, as the name suggests,

terminates a particular line of thought. The main effect of thought terminating exercises is to avoid uncomfortable, or difficult, discussions. Now, how many times over the years have I said something to the effect of, you cannot grow by staying inside your comfort zone? Well, that goes for the comfort zone of your thoughts too! We will not grow if we terminate lines of thought simply because they make us uncomfortable.

Those within the Pentecost crowd were uncomfortable at the thought of these provincial bumpkins suddenly having the sophistication to preach powerfully in multiple different languages. And rather than engaging further with this amazing scene, they would rather disregard what they are hearing in order to protect their opinions and prejudices. Hence, they're drunk! What an excellent way of avoiding interacting with people who are saying and doing incredible, but challenging, things.

Why? Why dismiss and disregard? Why terminate thought and discussion? Because they are afraid. Afraid of being challenged, afraid of being connected, afraid of being healed, afraid of being made whole, afraid of being called, afraid of losing power, afraid of being forgiven, afraid of justice, afraid of peace, afraid of mirror work, afraid of a lot of things. But that's what it largely boils down to, fear.

Jesus understood this proclivity to fear. He says some version of "Fear not" over a dozen times in the Gospels, including in our Gospel for today.¹ Our reading ends with "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Which is perfect advice when confronted with something that we'd prefer to avoid.

Seeking the equanimity of peace makes fear far less likely. Letting go of anxieties and troubles, though quite difficult, is a powerful antidote to fear.

¹ The phrase occurs even more from angels and other messengers from God.

Being willing to stay with people as they do the difficult thing though, that is perhaps the most important thing Jesus does. Through the Holy Spirit, God promises to walk with us through every trial and tribulation. God calls us to growth, so **of course** God will accompany us on the difficult path that leads to growth!

But the work is still ours. The work of avoiding thought terminating exercises and going deeper. Going outside of our comfort zone. The work of staying engaged, even when we're overwhelmed or despairing. It's HARD. No wonder Philip is looking for something concrete, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," he says at the start of our reading. Show us the goal! Give us something to look forward to too!

This question seems to bother Jesus a bit, after all he has made the point numerous times by now that the Father is in Jesus and vice versa. But rather than simply shutting Philip down with a cliché or mocking the question as silly, Jesus engages it. Jesus summarizes his teachings again, reiterating the in-dwelling-ness of the Father in the Son. Then he promises his followers the gift of the Spirit, the Advocate, who will be God's in-dwelling-ness in us.

This in-dwelling-ness of God, which we celebrated for little Henry just a little while ago, is the coming of the Kingdom of God into the world. Henry has now joined with us as a fellow worker in God's Kingdom. Working, without fear, towards a world filled with God's justice, peace, and love.

No thought terminating exercises allowed on the Way of Christ! Truth only! Truth shared in love and without fear. The hard personal truth of mirror-work and the loving, messy truth of living in community. Pentecost reminds us that we are never alone, God is always with us. Pentecost also reminds us of the work we are called to: the Gospel-sharing, community-building work of love. Amen.