

Acts 2: 1-11

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b] **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!

Reading from the New Testament

Thanks Be To God

Sermon 5/23/2021

Good Morning Everyone,

When Paulo invited me to act as a lay preacher, I was humbled and grateful for the opportunity. The children's moments I had been invited to do during the pandemic inspired my understanding of biblical stories, they were fun and even better they were received positively. I thought to myself, "with God's help, I can preach to adults", how hard can it be?

When the official request was made to preach on Pentecostal Sunday, while I agreed without hesitation, my immediate next thought was "and what exactly is Pentecost"? The only associations I could draw with Pentecost included images of fire and of Christian evangelists speaking in tongues. I knew I had some work to do.

After reflecting on the reading from the New Testament and the story of Pentecost, it appeared to me that there were three significant ideas to touch upon in my sermon: **the birth of the church, the holy spirit and God's gift of diversity. [and they are all related]** I will touch on each of these today.

There are many theologians who will contend that Pentecost is a more important Holiday than either Easter or Christmas because it is central to our understanding of what it means to be Christian and the birth of the church.

Historically, Pentecost began as and remains one of the major holidays on the Jewish calendar that occurs 50 days after Passover. This holiday, Shavuot, commemorates the anniversary of the day when God gave the Torah to the Hebrews at Mount Sinai. It is also a celebration of the harvest and a time when the Hebrews give thanks to God for what the land had produced and what their labor yielded. The reading today shares with us that “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.” This gathering of individuals was likely because the celebration of Shavuot brought people from many different nations to Jerusalem. Amidst this group of people who had traveled far and wide to Jerusalem, were the apostles who were hiding from the public for fear that they would meet the same fate as Jesus. When the Holy Spirit made itself known, these apostles, including Peter, who denied knowing Jesus only 53 days earlier, were miraculously changed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and went on to begin what we call today, the Church. Shortly after Pentecost, Peter preached to over 3,000 people who officially converted to Christianity and the Church was born. Inspired by Peter and his first sermon, the apostles became equipped to carry on the ministry that Jesus had begun.

What was the miracle that changed the apostles from being filled with fear and doubt to that of conviction? Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised them, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The apostles were instructed to wait for the Holy Spirit to come to them. I find this to be such a meaningful study of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not tell his disciples to take the knowledge they had learned from him over the several years they were together and begin their teachings. He did not suggest they rely on their life experiences, their academic knowledge or religious laws to evangelize. He instructed them to wait for the Holy Spirit to provide them with the power they need to participate in God’s work of redemption and salvation. [key message—ask God/Spirit for help—this is the power behind us] Pentecost is the day that Jesus officially transfers the responsibility of ministry to his disciples.

This is an important lesson for me. Pentecost is the day when God demonstrates that all good works are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The story of Pentecost reminds me that my responsibility as a person of faith extends beyond intellectual curiosity, good intentions, doctrine or even spiritual principles. As people of faith, we all can harness the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out and perform works of faith as modeled by Jesus.

While preparing to write this sermon, I expressed concern to Paulo and several of my friends. I worried that I was not Christian enough, that I would not talk clearly enough and that in a nutshell, I simply would not be enough. Several of those individuals including Paulo, reminded me to simply let the Holy Spirit work through me. To pray and ask God for help. It was reassuring and hopeful. All too often, it is easy to get caught up in self-centered thinking which for me typically rotates around what others will think of me. However, when I practice faith in such a way that allows me to listen to ways in which I can be useful and God-centered, the work is meaningful and leaves me with greatly diminished feelings of doubt, worry, self-condemnation. While the story of Pentecost describes the Holy Spirit making a grand gesture, in my daily life these gestures are typically small and rarely obvious. My understanding of the Holy Spirit has been greatly influenced by the time I have spent actively participating in a 12 step recovery program. A twelve step program requires that one develop a spiritual life and a dependence on a power greater than themselves, however, it is not religious. In my early years of recovery I was speaking to another fellow, who said eight simple words to me "Be still and know that I am God". I thought this was an original quote only to discover it is from Psalms (46:10). Being still, waiting or listening to a still quiet voice was not something I had much practice doing. I was what one might call a human reactor. I allowed my feelings to dictate my actions and took no time to consider the situation or the impact they might have. Pentecost reminds us to slow down, to listen, to pray and to wait. As the Dalai Lama writes in Ethics for a New Millennium, "Religious faith demands spiritual practice." For me personally, this means taking a quiet half hour every morning to listen, to pray consciously and to be of service in my daily life. These practices do not provide any guarantees, but it relieves me of the burden of self and opens the door to a God consciousness. The Holy Spirit is transformative and provides the power to be the people we believe God wants us to be and to live in healthy relationship with the world about us.

Pentecost story also illustrates that God both celebrates and encourages diversity. On the day of Pentecost, people were present from every known continent, race and ethnic group during first century A.D. People attended from Africa, Asia and Europe. That is why there were Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Persians gathered in Jerusalem on that day. As preacher Marvin McMickle observes, "It is possible that God was doing two things at once. He was converting people who could take the message back to their respective countries and establish the gospel throughout the world; and perhaps more importantly for our world today, he was establishing a church that consisted of and welcomed people from every race and region of the world."

The story of Pentecost helps us to reflect on human diversity. During Pentecost, God does not erase our differences by creating one language but instead celebrates our differences by allowing each nation of people to have their own native language. It is natural and maybe even human in nature to find ourselves attracted to people who are like us. People who look

like us, who share the same cultural identity, similar socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences that we can identify with. Unfortunately, the Church too has gotten swept along in the wave of assimilation far too many times throughout history. In a blog written by preacher Willie Kriskche, she shares her experience of working with Native American students and the common belief that assimilation is part of Christianity's DNA. Why wouldn't these students think that when their grandparents were forced to attend boarding schools with mottos like "kill the Indian, save the child." Their hair was cut, their traditional clothes were burned, and they were punished for speaking their own language. For 500 years, Native people have been told that in order to follow and worship Jesus, they must learn how to act, speak, think, and pray like the White man does. For them, assimilation certainly appeared to be central to the Gospel message of the missionaries. [The United Methodist Church has been raising awareness about the church's complicity in cultural and real genocide as it relates to America's indigenous peoples—the boarding schools, the Sand Creek massacre, etc.].
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/horrific-sand-creek-massacre-will-be-forgotten-no-more-180953403/>
<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/justice-for-1864-massacre-pledged>

The story of Pentecost challenges this theory as do several other scripture readings that can be found in the book of Revelations, Daniel and the writings of Paul in the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians [Most scholars credit Paul as the author of Romans and Galatians. However, Ephesians and Colossians were likely not written by Paul. It is safer to say, "...Daniel, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians" and not mention]. Multi-culturalism is ever present in scripture. The story of Pentecost in particular helps us to understand how human diversity is one of God's greatest gifts to the world. This story suggests that while we may speak different languages or represent a different nation or ethnic group, we all have one thing in common, a faith in the holy spirit that can provide us with the strength we need to carry out Gods work in our daily lives.

We are fortunate to be in a world today where the discussion of racism, anti-semiticism, heterosexism, sexism, classism, ageism and ableism are more openly discussed. I recently joined a new start-up tech company where the average age is around 30. Prior to hiring or engaging in leadership, we are required to take anti-bias and diversity training. This was not the first time participating in this training. My previous company, a Fortune 50 company, also required this training. Here at ACC, we are invited to participate in social justice meetings and events. At home, we discuss racism, gender identity and ageism (both Noah and I are late bloomers). Within my 12-step fellowship we are engaging in conversations about race and language where our Black [I would say African American] American members are sharing how they have experienced racism in the rooms.

These trainings, meetings and discussions are wonderful but what happens when we are asked by a member of one of these communities to consider changing in a way that we may not understand or even agree with?

To illustrate this, I would like to share an experience that happened only a few weeks ago. Every Monday night I co-lead a study of the 12 steps for a large diverse group of individuals. During a particular share, I used the word “black” to describe how I felt about my future when I first found recovery. Shortly after the meeting where I shared this, I received a phone call from a member who is a Black American (who also happens to be a minister). We have known each other for many years. She shared with me how language can be hurtful and when we use black or dark to describe a negative experience it further promotes systemic racism. I was on board, nodding, listening and then I realized wait, she was talking about me. It was only after she pointed it out that I remember what I shared. It was not an easy thing to hear and even more difficult to understand but as I listened and thought about it, I began to understand it from her perspective. In fact, I began to wonder how this language may have influenced my own children’s experience of people of color. At the next meeting, I apologized for using that language and for anyone it may have hurt. For the next two weeks I received at least two phone calls a day (if not more) with a broad range of reactions. Some fellows were appreciative of the courage it took to apologize to the group. Others had questions... isn’t this going a bit too far? Wait, I can’t say the word black or dark anymore? What’s next? Other Black Americans in the group called and apologized to me for being put in a position where I felt I needed to make amends to the group. And still others considered leaving the group because as a white person, they no longer felt safe and were concerned about being judged if they used the wrong language during their sharing. This experience highlighted to me that it is easy to embrace diversity until asked to change an intrinsic behavior. In this case it was language, using the word black (or dark) to describe a negative experience. [Not for this sermon, but would be interesting to explore the use of light/dark language in the Bible. 1 John 1: 5-7, John 1:5 and many others].

I share this experience to illustrate the connection between language and the importance it has in our efforts to break down the barriers that separate us.

Pentecost story is a beautiful representation of the birth of the church, the power of the Holy Spirit and God’s love of Diversity.

I agree with the theologians who say that Pentecost is highly underrated and I invite us all to celebrate this wonderful holiday. The day of Pentecost empowers us through the Holy Spirit and reminds us to celebrate God’s love of languages and multi-culturalism. Let us remember the Apostles who hid behind closed doors in fear and instead open the doors to our hearts and minds. Let us listen attentively for the quiet voice of the Holy spirit. By doing this, we can learn to view the world through the lenses of our fellow human beings and practice God’s inclusive love in the world.

