



A SERMON

by Rev. Marcella Auld Glass: June 8, 2025



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A Spirit of Adoption

WHETHER YOU'RE HERE FOR THE FIRST TIME OR WHETHER YOU ARE HERE EVERY WEEK, I deeply believe that it is God who has invited you here today, and it is my privilege to welcome you as a guest in this place. In the music, in the liturgy, in the prayers, in the silence, I pray you will find what your soul needs this morning.

This past week, one of my seminary professors died. Walter Brueggemann was an Old Testament scholar, probably THE Old Testament scholar of the 20th century. So much of his teaching and writing has been incorporated into my understanding of the faith. You know his work through the best part of mine.

One thing he wrote that relates to today's service is about imagination. Today is the celebration of Pentecost—the day the holy spirit came upon a disparate group of believers and allowed everyone to be heard and understood in their own languages. It is a story that defies our imaginations when you look at the world around us.

So hear these words from Brueggemann, as he equates the work of biblical prophets to the work of imagination:

"The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus, every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one." —Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*

So I challenge us to imagine. To imagine a world where people can be understood across their differences. To imagine future alternatives that are counter to the current narrative of hatred, xenophobia, and violence.

As we worship this day, as we hear stories from scripture that seem fantastical and hard to believe, remember that is the point. Scripture calls us to imagine better worlds, and once they are imagined, then we do the work to create those better worlds.

Acts 2:1-4

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

Galatians 4:1-7

What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces(a) of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.(b) Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba,(c) Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

TODAY WE CELEBRATE THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH, as we remember the day the Spirit descended and helped a bunch of disparate Jesus followers coalesce and come together with one purpose—to proclaim the good news of God, regardless of language difficulty, regardless of geographic differences, regardless of political affiliation.

The Spirit brings them together.

With one purpose.

And the church is born.

We celebrate that. We give thanks all these years later, we can mark an anniversary, remember the beginning, when we were united in one purpose to proclaim the good news, and to be witnesses to the end of the earth, even to San Francisco.

But it is also appropriate for us to mark this nearly 2,000th birthday of the church with an open assessment of where we are today.

Because no matter how healthy this particular congregation is, *and I think we're actually doing pretty well*, we acknowledge hard to see one purpose around which all of Christ's followers come together despite our differences.

I don't see many instances of Judeans gathering together with conservative evangelicals, or Cappadocians in the same room with Lutherans from the part of Libya belonging to Cyrene when I look around at the church at large.

We fracture along lines of politics, theology, doctrine, culture, race, class, language, and geography. It is the tension inherent in Pentecost. The Spirit brings us together, but doesn't make us all the same. We continually need the Spirit as we struggle to seek understanding through our differences.

I haven't really spent much time in a room like the one described on Pentecost, where the sound of a violent wind knocked everything off the shelves and singed people's hair, leaving them able to understand the others in the room, the people who, moments before, were unintelligible because of language differences.

But I will say that when I take the time to have a conversation with someone with whom I disagree about something, if I can set aside my defensiveness, I can usually hear what is under the topic of the conversation. If I really listen, I can hear their language of fear, or worry, or love—even if it comes to a different conclusion than my fear, worry, or love does.

Often, we want to pray the other person will start speaking the RIGHT language, would have the CORRECT understanding, rather than praying for a sense of understanding to come among us, despite our different languages.

Often, we fear diversity, we fear difference, we distrust those who hold other viewpoints.

I wonder if the Pentecost story could even happen today in our country, as we surround ourselves only with people who speak our own languages, whether literally or metaphorically. *Do we rule out an experience of the Spirit as we saw at Pentecost by our refusal to tolerate difference?*

Because there isn't a need for the Spirit to come bring understanding to a room full of people who already understand each other.

Is there?

Someone was talking about the importance of diversity, and she used the illustration of cornbread. She writes: "It's like making cornbread. You need meal, you need flour, you need baking powder, you need eggs. You need to put all those ingredients together to make that cornbread. You can't do anything if you keep them separate."¹

Diversity of belief, of skin color, of sexual orientation, of politics—that isn't a weakness we have to overcome. **It is the recipe for our success.**

The miracle of Pentecost wasn't unity or fancy new languages. It was not a miracle of the Spirit showing up, pointing to the one person with the right doctrine and theology and language and saying, *"Okay, everyone, now you're going to speak his language and be just like that guy."*

The miracle of Pentecost is one of understanding across divides. It maintained diversity and the sources of our disagreement and misunderstandings and prejudices. It overcame those with understanding.

And we need Pentecost today, more than ever. Because the powers of this world want us divided. They want us to not listen to each other, to not understand each other. They want us to listen to them, and their small, narrow understanding of what it means to be a people. We must imagine better than that.

The book of Acts, from which the Pentecost story comes, reminds us that nationalism in any form is not what God seeks for the world. Willie Jennings, in their commentary on Acts, writes: *"God from the very beginning of the Acts drama will not share holy desire with any nationalistic longing that draws borders and boundaries. The Holy Spirit will break open what we want closed and shatter our strategies of protectionism for the sake of a saving God who will give back to us precisely what we cannot hold onto with our own efforts and power...."*

We need Pentecost.

After Pentecost, we all still get to remain our unique and different selves.

After Pentecost, we are reminded that understanding is possible, and it is up to us to seek out and demand that blessing from the Spirit.

We also heard a passage this morning from Paul's letter to the Galatians, about how we are adopted into the family of God.

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent their Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of their Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/jun/01/united-states-polarization?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-1

This isn't a Pentecost story, exactly. It doesn't refer to a particular anniversary in the life of the church. Paul reminds us, though, that the Holy Spirit didn't only show up that one day, when the early church was gathered in a room. The Spirit arrives again, and again, and again.

In Galatians, the miracle of the Spirit is to make us family, heirs of God. As many of you know, adoption is a big part of my life story. The idea of people becoming adopted into God's family is something I understand very well, and something for which I am very grateful.

Adoption, though, always requires people to learn new languages. My adopted family loves me deeply. They always have. Their love doesn't make us similar in all ways.

I'm a morning person. The rest of them would sleep until noon if schedules allowed. That's just one of many illustrations, but living together in a family of adoption requires you to learn the language, the habits, the traits of the other people in your family. I have always felt like I was on a somewhat different wavelength than they were all on, somehow often a step off from them.

My family had the shared language of experience, of life lived together, and that helped the translation issues a bit. I started to see that more clearly as I met people from my birth family. There are so many things about my birth family that seem familiar and comfortable, but without a life lived together, there is translation required there too.

Even if your family doesn't have adoption as part of it, you have likely also experienced the challenge of loving people who may see the world very differently than you do. Even biological families can have great difference within them, as adopted families always do.

And so the miracle of being made part of God's family is one I appreciate more and more each year. Later this summer will mark my fifth anniversary of being here as your pastor. And you have welcomed me as family. To be loved enough to be made family is a sacred gift.

Our experiences with our earthly families are each different, and all are complicated in their own ways. God sent the Son, that we might be adopted into God's family, and God sent the Spirit into our hearts, to give us new language through which we understand our relationship to God and to each other, so that we can do the work to heal our earthly families.

At this past week's session meeting, your elders spent time talking about how to deepen community here at Calvary. Our relationships with other people at church are a crucial part to our experience of church. Like adoption, we are made family by choice, by coming together from our different origins, to be church family together.

And it is shared experiences that help us overcome our translation issues. Time spent together—at coffee hour, on the church retreat, in prayer and bible study, volunteering at the food pantry, marching at PRIDE, or gathering around a table at a meal—that time spent together makes us like the Acts story, when we gather together so the Holy Spirit can blow through and bring us the understanding that can help us remember God has made us family for each other.

Over the coming year, the session is going to invite you into some new ways of coming together in the life of the church. We're excited about how that might look and hope you will be too. But it will require a bit of a culture shift. It will require you to think about how you schedule your time. Are you willing to commit to engaging more deeply in relationship at church? I hope you'll think and pray about that over the summer.

Here's a poem by Jan Richardson that has been speaking to me all week.

When We Breathe Together

A Blessing for Pentecost Day

This is the blessing
we cannot speak
by ourselves.

This is the blessing
we cannot summon
by our own devices,
cannot shape
to our purpose,
cannot bend
to our will.

This is the blessing
that comes
when we leave behind
our aloneness
when we gather
together
when we turn
toward one another.

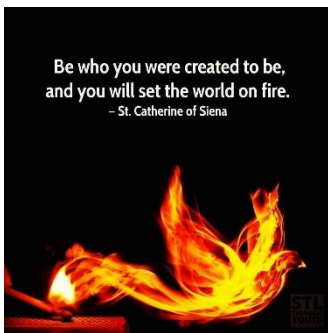
This is the blessing
that blazes among us
when we speak
the words
strange to our ears
when we finally listen
into the chaos
when we breathe together
at last.

The miracle of Pentecost wasn't only in the moment where they understood each other. It was the blessing of being together with different and interesting people, and not having to try to all be exactly the same. What would happen if we were open to that kind of blessing?

For me, today, the gift of the Pentecost story is adoption. The creation of a new family, made up of different, disparate people. On Pentecost, the Spirit of God was poured out on all flesh, but it didn't make them all the same.

It is one of the many things I so appreciate about you. You have fun together. You seek to welcome people without expecting them to pass a litmus test. You seek to be your authentic selves too, trying to allow individual expression and not let differences get in the way of loving each other.

Catherine of Sienna is quoted as saying:



It takes courage to be who you were meant to be.

It takes courage to allow others to live into who they were meant to be too.

This is Pride month, when we celebrate how God made us in a diversity of gender identity and sexual orientation. Pride is an adoption story, as it is also a protest story. With Pride, we protest injustice and discrimination against our LGBTQIA+ loved ones. We also celebrate the ways we adopt each other as families, especially when our own families' translation problems are too big to solve. I will always be willing to give 'free mom hugs' at Pride. I also pray for the day when everyone can be hugged by their own mom.

Today is also World Refugee Day. I hope you can stay after coffee hour for a conversation with our guests about what it means to need adoption in not just a new family, but in an entirely new country.

It takes courage to open yourself to understanding someone else's perspective.

So pray for the Spirit to come, to bring us together, to give us understanding in our differences, to remind us we're family, and to set the world on Pentecost fire.

Amen.