

“Pentecost Sunday”
"E Pluribus Unum or Out of Many, One"
Acts 2:1-21

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June 5, 2022

Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and ten days after his ascension into heaven, one hundred and twenty people—including Mary, the mother of Jesus--were gathered in a large upper room when, after a long period of fasting and prayer, there suddenly erupted a maelstrom of wind and flames. And what this symbolized was the arrival of what had been promised by Jesus himself, the gift of the Holy Spirit- Christ’s OWN PERSONAL PRESENCE in spiritual form. Once they were filled by it, they then began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. I had a professor in college who used to say that the REAL miracle of Pentecost wasn't the loud rushing wind that filled the room or the small flames that settled over each person's head or even the speaking in tongues that followed but the fact they had remained in one accord, that is, of one heart and mind and soul for so long. It was that they had come together and laid aside their personal prerogatives and ambitions for the sake of the larger good- especially in what had to be such a hot, unvented room with no air conditioning or bathroom or kitchen facilities available to them. And yet, that is just what they DID. And it wasn't until they WERE of one accord that the Spirit COULD arrive and fill them with his presence. I believe that professor of mine may have been onto something.

Luke--the author of the book of Acts--proceeds to give us a laundry list of some of the nationalities that were in Jerusalem at the time. He tells us that there were Parthians and Medes, Elamites and Mesopotamians. There were Judeans and Cappadocians and persons from Pontus and Asia, including Phrygia and Pamphylia. Africans from Egypt and Libya and Cyrene were also present as were citizens from Rome and Crete and Arabia. They were there to celebrate one of the great solemn feasts of the Jews- the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost which celebrated the annual grain harvest after it had been collected. Upon hearing these Christians under the influence of the Holy Spirit speak in their own language, they were amazed and said among themselves, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it we hear from their lips, each of us in his own native language, the mighty works of God?"

One of the things that makes this account so intriguing is that it is connected to the story of the Tower of Babel that takes place way back in Genesis. It began with everyone then speaking one common language. Then one day, the thought came to them to build a city and in the midst of that city, they would construct a tower, one that would be SO high, it could reach far up into the heavens. They wanted to be imposing and impressive, and such a project could make them the GREATEST city in the ancient world, or so they thought. But God knew that when such pride takes center place in a people’s life, it can corrupt their imaginings, to the point they think they are actually ABOVE God, perhaps even to where they think they no longer NEED God any more. And when THAT happens, then they have become their OWN god and it’s only a matter of time before they self-destruct. Thus, God confused their language so they could no longer understand each other and then he dispersed them all throughout the world. Now contrast

that with the Pentecost event where persons representing every different nation, language, and dialect are brought together by a common message through the language of the Spirit which is understood by everyone. People once scattered and in conflict with one another are finally brought together in a WHOLE NEW community, one which is founded in humility and love. Thus with Pentecost, you have the story of the birth of the Church which is really the story of the Tower of Babel told IN REVERSE.

What is so often overlooked amid all the strange phenomena that occurred that day is that it is about LEARNING TO LIVE WITH DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION, and if we fail to learn this lesson, then Pentecost will have very little meaning. The first major controversy in the life of the church was when those early Christians had to face the question of whether to admit Gentiles or non-Jews into membership. God gave Peter a vision of a great sheet being let down from heaven containing every kind of beast that was considered unlawful for any good Jew to eat. Then came the command from God for him to take and eat. As a good Jew, Peter objected, insisting that he had never eaten anything common or unclean. But God tells him, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." Three times God gave him this vision. Later, he explained what he had seen to Cornelius, saying, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

This is certainly a lesson we as Americans need to learn and RE-LEARN again and again. When hundreds of white supremacists marched in a torch-lite parade through the center of Charlottesville, Virginia in the summer of 2017, it was to the chants of "You will be replaced," a spectacle all-too reminiscent of the torch-lit parades the Nazis held in Nuremberg, Germany over 80 years ago. The rise of white nationalist sympathizers, of skinhead and neo-nazi groups and their offshoots along with the spread of their nativistic, hate-filled ideology, is motivated by MORE than just a hatred of any race or culture that does not resemble their OWN or any religion that does not identify as Christian. MUCH of it is rooted in the IRRATIONAL FEAR that with the integration of increasing numbers of black, brown and yellow peoples along with their various cultures into our country, whites in America along with their white European heritage will no longer be a majority. It will then be only a matter of time before their OWN culture will disappear COMPLETELY. This so-called "replacement theory" continues to spread a racist, hate-filled philosophy that promotes white superiority to the exclusion of anything different. As a consequence, it has contributed to the increasing rates of violence now being incited against many Jews and Blacks and Asians. They are being beaten up and told to "go back to their OWN country" when their "OWN" country has always been HERE, in AMERICA. It has also served as the inspiration for a great number of the mass shootings that has terrorized our nation, including the murder of eleven Jews that took place during worship at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, or the murder of ten Blacks at a Tops Supermarket in Buffalo only last month.

Two years ago this week, in the wake of the George Floyd killing in Minneapolis at the hand of an aggressive police officer, Thomas Friedman--the three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize For International Reporting—wrote a column he entitled "Let's Change Our Motto to 'Out of Many, We'" in which he addressed the deep fissures that have continued to divide and paralyze our nation. Born and raised in Minneapolis HIMSELF, he spoke of how America was

in deep crisis and openly questioned how our democracy, were it to remain on its current trajectory, could long survive. He wrote:

There are so many prisms through which to view the tectonic events taking place on America's streets since the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, but to my mind the MOST IMPORTANT is that our country is in the process of renegotiating its founding motto, carried on the seal of the United States: "E pluribus unum," or "Out of many, one." I'd say that our motto USED to be "Out of many, one," but it's now heading for "Out of many, NONE." I fear it could become "Out of many, ME." But I am certain that if we're to thrive in the 21st century it needs to be "Out of many, WE." "Out of many, we" acknowledges that "we the people" are now MORE DIVERSE than EVER — that diversity, when it can be made to work, is a tremendous source of resilience, innovation, creativity and renewal. But for that diversity to be a strength again for America, it cannot be based any longer on a white majority learning "tolerance" for nonwhites — the descendants of slaves and immigrants. Tolerance is important to be sure. But "Out of many, we" summons us ALL — people of EVERY color — to a deeper commitment to pluralism: a robust appreciation of the distinctive contribution of every community and a commitment beyond rhetoric to make sure that each one has the schools, governance and policing that enables that contribution.

Friedman concluded:

If that continues, America, this great experiment, will eventually just blow apart. And then our tombstone will read: "Out of many — just bits, pieces and fragments." We can't let that happen.

But what's true in the social and civic arena is NO LESS true in the religious and spiritual realm. We are always tempted to draw the line tightly, to restrict and exclude from the fold persons who are different from ourselves, persons who perhaps look or live differently or share different values or who think differently than we do- and yet we have to continually contend with the biblical mandate to open our doors and love them even as we love ourselves. We are called to remember, even as PETER HIMSELF found, that in every nation, all those who fear God and do what is right are to be accepted and embraced in the Body of Christ. There is nothing more damning to our cause then when we reinforce the observation once made by Dr. Martin Luther King that the most segregated hour in our nation is 11:00 on a Sunday morning, the hour most Americans go to church!

This was also of paramount concern to Jesus regarding his ministry- the complete lack of unity among his followers. He was constantly frustrated by the divisions within the group, how they were always arguing amongst themselves as to who was the HEAD disciple and who was going to sit on Jesus' right hand when he finally came into his kingdom. Time and time again, you can see how it was his followers who were often scandalized the MOST by his ministry, by the way he opened his heart to those whom their own customs and traditions had forbidden them to even ASSOCIATE with- whether it was to Gentiles or sinners, to lepers or the demon possessed, to Samaritans or to women. Yet Jesus CONTINUED to love and accept these even as he did his OWN disciples. Jesus was SO concerned about the discord among them that in the hours just prior to his arrest and crucifixion, he specifically prayed to his Heavenly Father that they might be ONE. It would be through their UNITY, through the disciples willingness to subordinate their own personal desires and ambitions for the greater good of Christ's ministry

and God's kingdom, that the REST of the world would come to believe in the TRUTH of the gospel.

But in the two thousand years since, can we ACTUALLY SAY that Jesus's concern as addressed in that prayer has finally been realized? What we the Church, his physical body in the world, have failed to understand is how the church is meant to be the MODEL, the EARTHLY REFLECTION of the kingdom of God. God intends for US to be a foretaste of heaven on display to the rest of the world. People don't need to look to what the Bible says about the afterlife to figure out what heaven looks like- they should not have to look any further than their local churches and the lives of the persons who fill them Sunday after Sunday. Right now, the United Methodist Church is negotiating a split into two separate denominations- one dedicated to conservative principles and the other, to a body more progressive in nature. Only a few years ago, it was the Presbyterian Church (USA)--our OWN denomination--which had to deal with this when after years of conflict between those which were more conservative and others more progressive, the schism ultimately came to a head. We were forced to finally allow a number of our churches to leave because we had adopted a more open policy regarding gay marriage and the ordination of homosexuals, standards our MORE CONSERVATIVE brethren could not agree to. Then two weeks ago, there was the outrage over the release of an investigative report of how leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention tried to bury a study on the number of sexual abuse cases which for years it had denied and even tried to hide. It was the Roman Catholic Church scandal ALL OVER AGAIN except now involving the largest Protestant body in the nation. As a result, some Christians and their congregations have already begun planning to disaffiliate themselves from their Baptist brethren. The Church of Jesus Christ which is supposed to represent his bodily presence in the world has never been more conflicted and more fragmented, and I have to believe that GOD is aggrieved by this most of ALL!

Among the marks of any TRUE church, the first and foremost is this- that despite not looking the same, talking the same, or even thinking the same, WE HAVE BECOME ONE because we have been miraculously joined together by "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all," as Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. As such, the TRUE test of our faith and commitment does not lie in whether we all concur on the major doctrines but whether we will be strong enough and faithful enough to get beyond all those artificial boundaries we create- boundaries of nation and blood and race and ethnicity and gender and geography and history and class and sexual orientation. We will be judged not on the basis of how correct our theology is or the soaring beauty of our hymns or prayers or how faithful we may be to our creeds or the Book of Order. No! We shall be judged by whether we can transcend those artificial social barriers and distinctions and become God's children living lives of love and service in God's family as one, joyous people.

I've mentioned in the past how when I was a pastor in Syracuse, NY, I served on the board of the Inter-Religious Council of Central New York, the largest inter-faith (I said "inter-faith" and NOT "inter-Christian") body in the state outside of New York City. Consisting of a myriad of religious traditions including Christians and Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, Sikhs and Bahais among others, we regularly came together to plan ways in which we could make Syracuse a more sustainable place to live for ALL. We even held joint worship services together in which everyone participated in, hence, experiencing a oneness in purpose and fellowship that was

MORE honest and loving and faith-filled than many Presbytery meetings I've attended where we are all of the same denomination. It worked because we understood that there was far more which we held in COMMON than that which DIFFERENTIATED us from one another.

As you can understand, with my work in the Presbytery, I meet a lot of pastors and their parishioners and their lament is always the same- that they want to see their church grow. Yes, they are genuinely sincere about wanting to bring in more members and increasing their finances and expanding their programs, but underlying that statement is the desire to ACTUALLY grow with persons MOSTLY LIKE THEMSELVES- persons who LOOK and BEHAVE and even BELIEVE just like the rest of their members. For instance, years ago I was visiting one of my elders and we were talking about the community I had been ministering in- a lily-white conservative enclave safely situated on a hilltop. I asked him why he thought we couldn't attract any minorities to the town and he responded quite honestly, "Because we don't want them here, Dave." That seemed to sum up the attitude of many in my church as well as in the community. That didn't make them bad- only very insular, very provincial in their attitudes. Churches today are not much interested in attracting single mothers on welfare or young men just released from prison; they don't want to see alcoholics or drug addicts both past or present entering the sanctuaries of THEIR church, or Blacks and Latinos, gay and lesbian Christians who are looking for a church home after so many OTHERS had ALREADY closed their doors to them- NO!

The reality is that God doesn't let us choose who can or CANNOT join his church- he simply opens his arms and says "whosoever will, COME!" He says if you're sick, COME and be healed; if you're tired, COME and be refreshed; if you're lonely, COME and find friendship; if you're ostracized, then COME and find acceptance; if you're hungry, COME and be fed; if you're without a roof over your head, COME and find a home; if you're struggling with addictions of one sort or another, COME and find release! THAT'S what church is and SHOULD be about! What it's NOT about is having the minister stand before you Sunday after Sunday to tell you in his or her most pious tones what good people you are and how you can remain comfortable in your goodness!

Jesus SHOCKED the people of his day by being so inclusive. He reached out to the poor, the sick, the marginalized. He welcomed women, children, Gentiles, and Samaritans. He embraced prostitutes, tax-collectors, the demon-possessed and even those afflicted by leprosy, the most heinous disease in the world at the time. He never denied a request or turned a single person away- EVER! He thus established the model as to how WE OURSELVES--as "little Christs"--should live in terms of our OWN lives and ministries. Thus, a Pentecost church is one that is constantly reaching BEYOND the things that divide us. A Pentecost church is one that is willing to take risks and engage people who may look or sound or act differently from the person usually sitting beside us in the pew. It is unfortunate that the word "Pentecostal" has been co-opted by those churches that emphasize speaking in tongues and the laying on of hands but a TRULY PENTECOSTAL church is the one that is indeed loving, the one that maintains a GENUINE open door policy- one that not only allows strangers into the sanctuary of their church but into the sanctuary of their hearts.

So, for me, THIS is what Pentecost is all about. It is learning day by day how the grace and love God offers each of us is FAR GREATER AND MUCH MORE EXPANSIVE than any

of us can possibly imagine, that the SAME Spirit who resides deep within our OWN hearts NO LESS resides within the hearts of our neighbors, regardless of how strange or different from us they may seem. WITHOUT such a knowledge, the church will forever remain small and insular and judgmental in her attitude, but WITH this understanding, the church can be FREE AND ALIVE AND CREATIVE ONCE AGAIN! It means going through life and celebrating those instances of grace wherever and whenever we encounter them, sharing whatever lessons concerning the love of God we have learned along the way. Only THEN will our churches become a REAL force for ministry in the world once again- a responsibility that involves EVERYONE and not just the minister. The same Spirit who is above us, below us, around us and within us, is always leading us into ever-new challenges, and unless we are willing to enlarge our OWN perspectives and take such risks, we can never grow into what the Spirit would intend for us to become. Let us pray...

God, on the day of Pentecost, your Spirit fell like tongues of fire. It filled those that were empty, and it empowered those that were weary; it brought together those who were divided and reassured those who were afraid. By its power, we can walk together as one and by its power we can find strength to share. Through the power of your Spirit, we can find freedom in loving each other, and above all, by its power we can find life in you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.