

Sunday, June 9, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Romans 8:14-17
Acts 2:1-21

Tongues of Fire

Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit. The beginning of the church—what some call the birth-day of the church.

I have to admit to this being probably one of my favorite church holidays. The meaning of it; the implications of this day—they’re huge and hopeful and inspiring. Also, the secular world hasn’t attempted to commandeer it—there are no Happy Pentecost! cards—and none of you get any ideas either about selling Pentecost to the greeting card companies. ☺ It really is an interesting and fascinating day.

Jesus, before his ascension, had told the disciples to wait. Wait and they will at some point “receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them]; and [they] will be [Jesus’s] witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NRSV). And so, they wait. While they wait, they choose (God reveals to them) the person who replaces Judas, so they, once again, are the 12 apostles. Then, they wait some more.

Finally, on a day when they are all together in one place, from heaven comes the sound of a violent wind. It’s probably fairly easy for most of us here to imagine the sound of a violent wind, we hear it often enough. But this rush of wind fills the entire space where they are and divided tongues, as of fire, rested on each of them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak. Not only did they begin to speak, but they began to speak in other languages. So many different languages in fact, that all those who had gathered to listen, from Asia and Rome

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and Africa, and many other places, all those who had gathered to listen, could understand what was being said.

Stephanie Crumpton, a professor of theology, describes this scene beautifully. She writes:

Tongues of fire appeared over [the disciples] and gave them the power to speak about God in multiple languages. People who spoke these languages heard accents and words in syntaxes that were familiar. As a result, they did not have to nudge the person next to them and ask, “What are they saying? What is that word? What do they mean?” Nor did they have to take on the shame that often comes with having to confess, “I do not understand.” They could hear the good news of God for themselves. No one had to abandon the culture that gave them an identity in order to hear from God. God’s word came that day in a way that expressed God’s deep affirmation of diversity as a key ingredient in unity. (*Connections, Year C, Vol. 2*, ed. Joel B Green et al. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 329).

Each person was able to hear the good news for themselves. They didn’t have to give up their identity, their culture to hear the good news. They didn’t have to learn a new language or become someone different to hear the good news. On the Day of Pentecost, the good news was shared with all who had gathered in a way that each person could understand, shared in a way that reveals to all of us God’s affirmation of diversity.

For some who were gathered, the event, everyone being able to hear and understand in their own language what men from lowly Galilee were saying, for some, it was just too much—too fanciful—too unbelievable. Some of the people were so perplexed they declare the disciples must be drunk. That might sound a bit familiar as well. How often, when someone has spouted off an idea that seems so beyond anything imaginable, do we say, or do we hear, “what have they The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

been drinking?” or even “what exactly have they been smoking?”. But Peter is very quick to raise his voice and once again addresses the crowd. He reminds them of the prophecy from Joel, who wrote, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit...” (Joel 2:28-29, NRSV). Having reminded them of this prophecy, Peter declares to them this is that day! This is the day—“the one prophets foretold about how God’s spirit would one day pour out on female and male, young and old, free and enslaved. This was it!” (Ibid.)

And what we see on this day, this day when prophecy is fulfilled—is that diversity brought the people together. It was all the different languages being spoken that made the people come together and wonder if the apostles were drunk. It was hearing the word spread in so many different ways that led to the question that allowed Peter to proclaim the fulfillment of the prophecy. Uniformity did not bring together the community of believers on Pentecost—diversity did. “Diversity,” as Crumpton writes, “is affirmed as a primary tool through which God’s love is expressed” (Ibid., 330) which can often be very challenging for all of us. As Crumpton goes on to write:

...difference often invokes suspicion. When we do not know the language, we often respond with intolerance. Rather than affirm diversity as reflective of God’s will, assimilationist tactics that blot out distinctions while also reinforcing a culture of fear and suspicion are common responses to people who are unlike ourselves. Even though scientific research from the National Human Genome Institute confirms that all human

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beings are 99 percent genetically identical (alike), differences in language, culture, hair texture, and skin and eye color are still interpreted as reasons for suspicion. (*Ibid.*)

Yet the Day of Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit, shows us this is not how it is supposed to be. God affirms and loves and believes in the diversity of God's people.

As the body of Christ, we are called to live out that affirmation of diversity each day.

Crumpton says, "the body of Christ is called to disrupt suspicion of difference by centering the good news in a way that prompts us to extend toward, not retreat from, people who are unlike ourselves" (*Ibid.*). We can live this out in our lives in so many different ways. Perhaps we work to become fluent in a second or third or fourth language. Maybe when we travel, we work to learn the customs and some of the language of where we'll be going, instead of assuming everyone needs to learn our native language.

It's not just in traveling either, but in learning and education. Whose voices are we listening to and reading? Are they all like us? Do we assume that if a person is not a white American, we have nothing to learn from them? Or do we seek out other voices? Do we learn the stories of people who have a different perspective, a different lived experience, from our own? For what we see this day, what we see at the beginning of the church, on the Day of Pentecost, is a gathering of people so diverse and so unique that we know God must be at work. We see a disruption and erasing of the fear of difference and the culture of suspicion. We see unity—a unity that is born not out of sameness, not out of uniformity, but one that is born out of difference, born of diversity.

What a beautiful picture it is—this Day of Pentecost! May we learn from it. May we trust in it. May we know that the same Spirit gifted to the people that day, has been gifted to each of us and so may we find our unity in and through our diversity.

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