

Spirit of Unity, Spirit of Diversity

Joel 2:28-29

Acts 2:1-13

Before I read our texts and dive in to our Pentecost theme for this morning, I'd like to give you a brief update about where we are in our thinking and planning about congregational life and worship.

You may have been hearing talk about churches being encouraged to reopen, and some of them doing just that—particularly in other parts of the country. And it may be on your minds and hearts about when that might happen here, for us, and what reopening might look like. And all I can say right now is, Session is talking about that, we're taking it slowly, and with the utmost safety and precautions in mind. Session meets tomorrow, in fact (Monday, June 1) and we will be continuing our conversation about all of this.

We have been given a helpful document from the Presbytery that outlines their guidelines and requirements for the churches in our Presbytery as we all pray and discern and think through resuming our congregational life and ministry. The Presbytery and churches are following our governor's 4-phase safe reentry plan, which has been adapted just this week to allow for churches and other religious organizations to hold indoor services in Phase 2, should they determine

that is something they can do safely. Session will be reviewing this and the Presbytery guidelines, making plans accordingly. But please know we will be taking a slow and strategic approach, keeping everyone's safety as a priority, and seeking the direction and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

I would encourage all of us to continue in prayer for our congregational life and ministry, asking for guidance and wisdom and encouragement from the Holy Spirit.

And this brings us to our texts for this morning. That's exactly where the early church was on the day of Pentecost: waiting and seeking guidance.

Joel 2:28-29

²⁸Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' (their way of saying, 'drunk on cheap wine'—because it hasn't been aged)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Sometimes a name, belonging to one particular person or thing, becomes so attached to a particular object or product that we forget where it originally came from. For example, if I say the name "Hoover," most of us will think "vacuum cleaner." Even though there are a lot of vacuum cleaners made by a lot of other companies. It's just that Hoover became associated with that object. So much so, that a longtime friend of mine named his golden retriever Hoover. Because the dog sucks up everything on the ground wherever he goes.

Or, Band Aid. That's one brand name among many other brands that make the same product. But it is associated with a bandage for an owie, or

symbolically, with a way to put a quick fix on a problem. Like duct tape on a leaking water pipe is a 'band aid' solution.

Something similar has happened with the word Pentecost. If Pentecost means anything to most people today, it is probably associated with "Pentecostalism." And that probably signifies some sort of religious experience that involves a lot of hand raising and speaking in tongues and loud praying or a certain type of singing. Which is a stereotype. I have friends who embrace a Pentecostal expression of faith, and they would say that doesn't fully describe them.

And we often forget that *all* Christians—you, me, everyone who follows Jesus—derive their meaning from the first Pentecost. We are all Pentecostal, in a sense, because we are recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit. And we often forget, too, and equally importantly, just what Pentecost originally was, and meant.

For a first century Jew, Pentecost was the 50th day after Passover. It was an agricultural festival, and one of the three main pilgrim festivals where people travelled to Jerusalem from hither and yon to celebrate it. It was the day when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop, and offered it to God,

partly as a sign of gratitude, and partly as a prayer that all the rest of the crop, too, would safely be gathered in. This is the offering of the first fruits (which is explained in Deuteronomy 26 for all you Bible nerds out there).

But for the Jew, neither Passover nor Pentecost were simply agricultural festivals. These festivals were reminders of *The* great Story which dominated the memory and consciousness of the Hebrew people: the story of the Exodus from Egypt, when God rescued his people, and then gave them the law on Mount Sinai, which would set them apart as a unique people among all the peoples of the world (old King James: you shall be a “peculiar” people. That could be said of a lot of us :-). The idea: they were to be unique. And in redeeming a people and giving them this law, God created a new nation, set apart to be a light to the other nations.

This is the setting and background for what happens on the day of the Pentecost festival, as Jesus’ followers gather together to pray and wait, as Jesus told them to. Because they will receive, in the apostle Paul’s words, the “first fruits of the Spirit,” in a kind of a reverse offering from God to the people. Who are then sent out to bear witness to the gospel.

The other tie-in here to the Jewish feast is that what comes down from heaven on Pentecost is not a new law—like Moses came down from the mountain with a new law, following their redemption from Egypt—but what came down from heaven was the promised Holy Spirit, which came down following the redemption that Jesus accomplished. And thus, the church is born; a new people—a peculiar people—who are called to be a light to those around them. Many Christians celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit came to bind a very diverse group together *as a people*. I served a church as an interim pastor that served birthday cake on Pentecost Sunday. Red Velvet. Sounds pretty good right now, doesn't it?? Red Velvet cake for breakfast...

And so, with gratitude we celebrate this gift today. What we offer back to God is our gratitude for the Holy Spirit in our lives, and in the church.

And with gratitude, I'd like to point out today what our texts reveal as the great first-fruit gift of the Holy Spirit. What the prophet Joel and the account from Acts tell us is that when the Spirit came, the Spirit highlighted and enabled diversity. The Spirit highlighted and enabled diversity.

And I say highlighted, because the Spirit did not *create* diversity. Diversity already existed! It's just highlighted and empowered and unified. That's why we

are told of this long list of where people were from. Diversity was already present. What the Spirit did at Pentecost, and continues to do, is *highlight and enable* diversity. To unify God's people in their diversity.

When the Spirit came, and descended upon each person, no one was excluded! Luke points out to us that these flames separated and rested on each person. This wasn't a fire hose soaking of the Holy Spirit, but an individual blessing for each believer who was there, praying and waiting.

And when the Spirit came, the people began to speak, and hear, in their own native language. That was the amazement of Pentecost. What was spoken was heard and understood by people in their language, their mother tongue. God's mighty works proclaimed in an abundantly diverse number of languages, from around the world. Try to picture that. Imagine the vast collection, the melting pot of people gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Imagine people from these various cultures having their culture affirmed, and voiced.

Everyone spoke Greek at that time; it was everyone's second language, and the common language of the world at the time—the language of commerce, etc. So, the Holy Spirit could've enabled them to all speak boldly in a univocal

language. But what happened was that people heard the great good news in their native tongue.

There was so much cultural diversity present in Jerusalem at this time. In fact, Luke tells us that it was “every nation under heaven”! The whole world, as they knew it, was there! And every language was spoken.

And what’s cool about this, is that the same diversity exists in our country today. That is to be celebrated! That diversity exists in your neighborhood, at Alderwood Mall, in our schools, in our grocery stores. The nations are here; and we can be witnesses to the gospel to the nations without having to send a missionary anywhere, except out the front door. At the right time!

Our unity is in Christ Jesus, but that doesn’t mean that one culture or language is dominant or more Christian, and that others must conform to it. That’s the point here: the gospel is going to be for the world. Not for one group or tribe or nation. This is a gospel that speaks to *all* cultures and languages.

Reminds me of the heavenly vision from Rev.21:24-26. When all is said and done, when Christ has won the final victory, here is one piece of what heaven looks like, as John has a vision of this heavenly metropolis: “²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the rulers of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁶People

will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” Heaven will be a culturally diverse place. So, let’s celebrate it here and now!

This is why there is no room for racism in the Christian faith or in the church. This is a great reminder for us at Pentecost, amidst racial prejudice and injustice that we are seeing manifest in our country on a regular basis. It has always existed. Author and journalist Ta Nehesi Coates, among other African American activists, are telling us that this racism and violence against people of color is not new. What’s new is smart phones and cameras. We’re just seeing it. And we can’t remain indifferent to it.

Pentecost tells us that there is no dominant race or culture. The gospel, the Holy Spirit, is for all. Every *believer* who prays and waits for the Holy Spirit’s leading and empowerment receives it, regardless of who they are or where they came from. Every *hearer*, regardless of who they are or where they came from, should have access to the good news of the Kingdom of heaven in a language that they can understand.

Whether that language is literally a mother-tongue language, or another type of language that reflects peoples’ different place in life, or their cultural understanding and worldview. For example, *cross-generational* communication is

very much like cross-*cultural* communication today. Grandparents and great-grandparents communicating with grandkids and great-grandkids is a cross-cultural experience in many ways, even though everyone was born in the United States. Because people born in the early to mid 20th century, and those born in the 21st century were born into different cultures, and have unique experiences that shaped their understanding and their worldview and, therefore, their language—how they speak and hear and give and receive information and truth.

More about this another time; it's just a good example of the challenge and opportunity of communicating the gospel in a language that everyone has access to and can understand.

This leads to this passage from Joel. I LOVE this passage from Joel. Because it speaks, not just to diversity, but to inclusivity, when the Holy Spirit is given.

The Lord speaks through the prophet Joel and says that when the Spirit is poured out, **everyone** plays a part. Everyone will have visions and dreams. Not just some people, not special people, or only gifted people. But everyone; including unlikely people! He says, "I will pour out my spirit on **all** flesh; your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your

young shall see visions. ²⁹Even on the male and female *slaves*... I will pour out my spirit." Think about that.

Sons *and daughters* will speak for God. In those days, women weren't allowed to speak. So, that's radically inclusive. Old men will dream new dreams? They're supposed to be retired and stuck in their ways. Not dream dreams for the future. The young? They're immature and idealistic and can't be entrusted with future vision. Male and female *slaves*? C'mon. Slaves weren't considered human beings; they were held as property and therefore without substance or intellect or rights or voice. Yet they will have visions and dreams too, God tells us.

Again, no one is excluded! The day of Pentecost as told in Acts highlights *cultural and ethnic* diversity; world-wide diversity. What Joel's proclamation of the coming Holy Spirit highlights is a *socio-economic and gender* diversity. And generational diversity. The playing field is leveled. Everyone is needed, and included.

And diversity is not just for diversity's sake. What the Spirit gives in the midst of diversity, is vision, and dreams for the future. As the Spirit brings vision and dreams for the future, the point needs to be made here that the Spirit is ***always*** forward looking. The Spirit is always forward looking. We never see

anyone in Scripture, who has the Holy Spirit and an understanding of God's ways, say, "Let's do what we used to do," or, "Let's go back." That's why the question that the disciples asked Jesus, from Acts 1, "Are you *now* going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" is the wrong question. It's a backward-looking question. Which is why Jesus ignored it and gave them new instructions. The Spirit is always forward looking.

God says (in Isaiah 43:19 among other places) "Behold! I am about to do a new thing; do you see it?" So the question is not, "*Is* God doing a new thing?" The question is: "Do we see it?"

And as I mentioned a few weeks ago, my answer to that question is, not yet. It isn't hard to see that *something* is up! We live in a strange world right now, with everything in transition. So, something is up, even if we don't see clearly and specifically what God us up to. That's why we need to wait on God, and pray and keep our eyes and ears open. And, remain forward looking. Because God is doing a new thing.

And so I would ask all of you, all of us, to pray and ask the Spirit to bring vision and dreams for the future. Devote yourselves to prayer and listening to the voice of God, like we talked about last week. God is still speaking!! And all of us are

needed! Vision doesn't come exclusively from the pastor, or from the Session.

The pastor and Session are stewards of a common vision, that all of us contribute to.

So, will you pray about this? Will you ask God for visions and dreams for our future? Not just Maplewood's future, but the future of our neighborhoods and communities too. To see and embrace the great diversity that exists, and that the Holy Spirit wants to highlight and bring together.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn the light of his countenance upon you

and give you his peace, now and forevermore.

And all of God's people said...