

Diversity in the Spirit, Unity in Christ

Joel 2:28-29

Acts 2:1-13

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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 (insert Acts 1:14 here). 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 I like to ask, when we're talking about the Holy Spirit: I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear 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 can be a stereotype. I have friends who embrace a Pentecostal expression of faith, and they would say that doesn't fully describe them, and their experience. It *can* include those outward expressions, but that isn't all it means to them. It's as much of an inward experience as an outward expression.

And it's good for us to remember 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, whether we are aware of that or not, because it's simply something that comes with choosing to have faith in Jesus Christ. The New Testament doesn't tell us to get the Holy Spirit, but to come alive to what is already there. It's equally important to remember just what Pentecost originally was, and meant.

For first century Jewish celebrants, Pentecost was the 50th day after Passover. Hence, “penta...”, meaning “five,” or in this case, 50. The Jewish festival of Pentecost 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 the rest of the crop, too, would safely be gathered in later that year at harvest time. This is the offering of the “first fruits” (which is explained in Deuteronomy 26 for all you Bible nerds out there). The first fruit of the crops were offered to God as an offering of gratitude and trust.

But for Jewish folks, 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 redeemed his people from slavery (Passover), and then gave them the law on Mount Sinai (Pentecost). The latter festival would set them apart as a unique people among all the peoples of the world (I love how it’s translated in the old King James from Deut.14 God says: you shall be a “peculiar” people. That could be said of a lot of us :-). The idea: they were to be

unique. 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, once they receive it, are sent out to be a light, to share the good news of God's saving power and love.

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 through his death and resurrection. And thus, the church is born; a new people—a *peculiar* people—who are called to be a light to those around them. Many churches celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit came to bind a very diverse group together *as a people*, as a community. I served a church as an interim pastor that served birthday cake on Pentecost Sunday. Red Velvet!

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 readings 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 (the author of the book of Acts) points out to us that these fire-like flames separated and rested on each person. This wasn't a fire hose soaking of the Holy Spirit en masse, 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: that 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—it was 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 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 heard.

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 without having to send a missionary anywhere, except out the front door. World mission is still important as God calls and sends people abroad. And, at the same time, mission is right outside our doorstep because the nations are all here.

Therefore, one of the important things that Pentecost tells us is that 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. Equally.

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 will be like, as John shares this vision of this heavenly metropolis: “²⁴The nations (literally, the ‘ethna’—ethnic groups, not politically bordered nations, but people groups), 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 is a culturally diverse place, where the gifts of all ethnicities are brought into it. So, let's celebrate it here and now!

This is why there is no room for nationalism or racism in the Christian faith or in Christ's church. This is a great reminder for us at Pentecost. Pentecost tells us that *there is no* dominant race or culture or nation. The gospel, the Holy Spirit, is for all. Everyone who prays and waits for the Holy receives it, regardless of who they are or where they came from, or what language they speak. 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.

It's been interesting to observe that companies are holding workshops on cross-generational communication in the workplace, so that the workforce can be more effective and unified. And so employees from diverse generations can understand each other. God's people would be wise to pay attention to these things so we can learn from each other and communicate with each other about how God is working in our lives and in the world.

This leads to the 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. And it's a startling inclusivity, when we look at what is said in its original context.

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 or super spiritual 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 for God. So, that's radically inclusive. Old men will dream new

dreams? They're supposed to be retired and stuck in their ways. Not dream new dreams for the future. The young? They're immature and idealistic and can't be entrusted with future vision. Male and female *slaves*? In a somewhat subversive way, this is an announcement of the beginning of the abolition of slavery, and emancipation, because it declares their humanity, and their equality. They will be seen as human beings who equally share in the Holy Spirit's gifts and empowerment. 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. As a beginning of their release.

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

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 go back." Or even, "Let's keep things the same."

The Spirit is *always* forward looking.

God says (in Isaiah 43:19 among other places, which is on the cover of the bulletin) "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?"

My answer to that question for us today is: not yet. It *isn't* hard to see that *something* is up! We live in a strange world right now, with almost 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 keep our hearts and minds open, to remain forward looking. Because God is doing new things. Gal.5:25: "If we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." In other words, the Spirit is moving! Forward. In new ways. And we are called to keep in step with this Spirit.

And so, to pull this all together for us here at MPC, I would ask all of you once again—all of *us*—to pray and ask the Spirit to bring vision and dreams for the future. Whether you've been here for decades or just days. Whether children or youth or mature adults! We are invited to devote ourselves to prayer and

listening to the voice of God. 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 all around us, and that the Holy Spirit wants to highlight and bring together.

In Christ There is No East or West