

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

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Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and ten days after his ascension into heaven, one hundred and twenty people were assembled in a large upper room when, after a long period of fasting and prayer, there suddenly erupted a maelstrom of wind and flames. This symbolized the arrival of that which had been promised by Jesus himself, the gift of the Holy Spirit- Christ's OWN personal presence but now in a different form. Their Lord had promised that he'd never leave or forsake them and after ascending to the Father, he had returned. But instead of being at their side, eating and sleeping and ministering to them as he had for the PREVIOUS three and a half years, he was now taking up residence WITHIN them. He had returned to them all right but in SPIRITUAL rather than in bodily form, thus making their hearts his NEW home. In doing so, his followers would then constitute his NEW body--the "Body of Christ"—serving as his physical presence. His followers would henceforth operate as his hands, his feet, and his voice while performing his will throughout all the world. Once they were filled by it, then their FIRST act of ministry together would be to begin speaking in other languages, declaring the glory of God 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 been in one accord 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. When you see how divided and estranged people have become in our current day, unable to even talk REASONABLY together, I now believe he may have been right!

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, representing all the groups within the Empire. 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?"

Most people don't realize that this story is connected to the account of the Tower of Babel back in Genesis. Before the tower was constructed, they all spoke one language and came

together to undertake a project that would make them great. At the end, they can no longer understand each other and are scattered 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 are now brought together in community in the story of the birth of the church. Thus, what we have with Pentecost is the story of the Tower of Babel IN REVERSE.

What we DON'T usually get about the Pentecost story is that it is ACTUALLY about LEARNING TO LIVE WITH DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. It was the way God originally INTENDED us to, and if we fail to learn this lesson then Pentecost will lose its real meaning for us. 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 consume. 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 the difficult lesson that the Church has had to relearn again and again throughout the past two thousand years and in a thousand different ways. We are always tempted to draw the line tightly in order to restrict and exclude from the fold persons who are different from ourselves, persons who perhaps look or live differently, people who 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 to such persons and love them even as we love ourselves. We are called to remember that in every nation, as Peter HIMSELF found, 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 than 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!

One of the most disturbing and shameful stories I have ever heard involved the suspension of the Rev. David H. Benke, a Lutheran minister, who was accused of having worshipped with "pagans." His crime consisted of taking part in an interfaith prayer service at Yankee Stadium twelve days after the destruction of the World Trade Center. By sharing the Yankee Stadium stage with Muslim, Sikh and Hindu holy men, the pastor violated the church ban on syncretism, or the mingling of Christian and non-Christian beliefs. By appearing with Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox and other Protestants, he was guilty of "unionism," or the bringing together of Lutheran and non-Lutheran Christian doctrines. His punishment was suspension as president of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, a position equivalent to bishop for the New York metropolitan area. Rev. Benke refused to apologize, insisting that his was a stand against intolerance and an insular view of faith that not only prevents unity among peoples but one that promotes violence. Eventually, reason prevailed and he was restored to his position.

What we fail to realize is that the church is meant to be the model, the earthly reflection of the kingdom of God. God intends 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 the local churches and the lives of the persons who fill them Sunday after Sunday. 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. For years, 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 outside of New York City. We regularly met together, worked together, and even worshipped together, experiencing a oneness in purpose and fellowship that was more honest and loving and faith-filled than what I've experienced in some Presbytery meetings where because we're all Presbyterian ministers and elders, we're SUPPOSED to be as one.

Years ago, I was visiting one of the elders of my congregation 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 didn't have any minorities living in the town and he responded with all honesty, "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; they had YET to learn the true lesson of Pentecost.

Usually when I hear people say that they want to see the church grow, what they REALLY mean is that they want it to grow with persons JUST LIKE THEMSELVES- persons who LOOK like themselves, persons who LIVE like themselves, persons who BELIEVE just like themselves. They're 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 darkening the doors of THEIR church- NO! Rather, they gladly welcome people with wealth and prestige, those who project success such as bankers and lawyers, doctors and college presidents REGARDLESS how shabby their personal lives may be. But the reality is that God doesn't let us choose who can or CAN'T 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 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, demon-possessed persons and even those afflicted by leprosy, the most heinous disease in the world at the time. He never denied a request or turned a person away- EVER! He thus establishes 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 different or act differently from the person usually sitting next to 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.

Let me close by sharing with you a lesson I've learned over time that perhaps more than any other has transformed my life and my ministry. Years ago, when I first attended seminary, I went from a very conservative Christian college to one of the most liberal educational environments in the country, in Berkeley, Ca. I had gone from a small church school where it appeared that everybody looked the same, thought the same, and lived the same, to an international community where it seemed NOTHING was the same- basically, I had been thrust into a microcosm of the world. There, I found myself taking classes from ten different seminaries representing every major denomination including three Catholic schools and a Unitarian one. During my first semester, I heard things there that at the time deeply disturbed me. I heard, for instance, professors questioning the veracity and historicity of the scriptures, casting doubt on the physical resurrection of Christ, turning such basic tenets as his return at the end of history and even the existence of heaven into mere symbols for the church. After a few months, I found myself wondering whether going to seminary there had been a wise decision after all. I had such a closed mind that I practically DARED my professors to teach me anything, foolishly believing that perhaps they should be sitting at MY feet and learning from ME INSTEAD.

As my crisis of faith intensified, God began to speak to me about this and I felt his presence in a way that I had never experienced before. It was as though the Holy Spirit was saying to me, "All right, David- quiet down and start listening to ME for once! Did I not call you into ministry in the first place and have I not guided your development since? It was I who brought you out here to California and I've now led you to this place for the next stage of your growth. Don't you think I know what I am doing? Sure you're feeling challenged, but that's GOOD- you're SUPPOSED to. After all, I AM THE GOD OF DIVERSITY! I want to stretch you in ways you've never been before. I want to enlarge your understanding of me and my work in the world so that you will discover that I am a much BIGGER, a much more INCLUSIVE God than you think I am. I want to enlarge your heart so that your pity and sympathies for people and their problems will become EVEN GREATER. I want to draw you closer to me so that your sense of my personal care over you will never leave you. Only trust that I am with you, that I'm at your side and in your heart. Be confident and do not be afraid to take risks. That is

the ONLY path to TRUE growth, to REAL maturity."

Once I stopped fighting my professors in seminary and began listening to them, then my REAL education began in earnest. I realized that I no longer had to FEAR looking at God in different and creative ways. I've since come to believe that his grace is much wider than I had thought, that his love extends to non-Christians the world over and that it includes persons of all genders and races and nationalities and even those who embrace alternative lifestyles. I've come to see how God loves Arabic Muslims as well as American Presbyterians, liberal Democrats as well as conservative Republicans, gays as well as straights. Thus, I soon went from professing a God who was small and narrow and restrictive to a God who was WONDERFULLY DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE. All that was involved was simply learning to trust that the same God who loved and lived within me, loved and lived within THEM as well; it was learning to acknowledge that evidence of his grace and truth could be found ANYWHERE if only we'd approach it with open eyes instead of with blinders on.

THIS is for me what Pentecost is all about. It is trusting that the Spirit of God is vitally present in my life and because of that, I am now able to live more confidently instead of always being on the defensive, emphasizing more his grace and love and less his laws and judgments. No longer am I the cocksure person I was years ago- the arrogant young man who thought he had all the answers. Instead, I now go through life celebrating those instances of grace wherever they present themselves and simply sharing whatever lessons concerning the love of God that I've learned along the way. Plain and simple, THAT'S what my ministry is all about, and it's what YOUR ministry should be about- knowing that the same Spirit who is above us, below us, around us and within us CONTINUES to guide and lead us to ever-new challenges, and that unless we are willing to ENLARGE our perspectives and TAKE SUCH RISKS, we can never grow into what the Spirit intends us to be. We'll never be anything more than small and narrow-minded people who PLAY church on Sunday mornings and then betray what Christians SHOULD be throughout the REST of the week! Let us pray...

God of variety and difference, 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; by its power we can find strength to share. By its power we can find freedom in loving each other, and ABOVE ALL, by its power we can find life IN YOU once again! In Christ's name we pray. Amen.