

I Corinthians 12:3b-13
Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost A
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Notes not for publication

I wonder what you came to worship expecting today. Did you know it was Pentecost Sunday? If you did, do you know what that means? If you didn't, do you care? Even if you are familiar with Pentecost, does it mean anything past the hour that you'll sit here in the sanctuary? Are you expecting anything to happen today?

Way too often, church is a place where the last thing we're looking for is transformation. Way too often, the church is less a crucible and more a chaise lounge. Way too often, the church has assumed the job of making us the same as everyone else, helping us fit in with "decent" folk, changing our outer identity to fit an outer standard. You may know we're engaged in an official process through the Austin District of the UMC, called "Transformation." It would be easy to see this process as tinkering with that outer identity. The temptation is to use Transformation as just a way to tweak how we do what we already do, maybe add some programs that will attract new people, spruce things up and be more friendly and efficient. But though these may be suggestions of the process, tweaking is not the core purpose of Transformation, and it's sure as heaven not the purpose of Pentecost.

The purpose of this holy day in the life of the church is to remind us of the power of God, how that power acts on us, and what that power would have us do in the world. I don't preach a lot of three-point sermons, but I guess this might be one.

The power of God as revealed to us on Pentecost is wild and potent,

uncontrollable and unpredictable. The symbols and poetry the scripture uses to communicate this event to us are elemental—wind and fire. Wind draws to mind the power of God in the beginning, at creation itself. The same Hebrew word is used for spirit, wind, and breath, and we read in Genesis that that wind of God blew across the waters of chaos before the beginning of the world. When God breathes out the Wind, the Spirit, new things come into existence, and new life is born. Wind releases energy—it fills a sail, and the boat takes off; it turns the rotors of a windmill, and you’ve got clean electricity. So the wind also blew at the birth of the church, releasing new energy for ministry.

In the Pentecost story, tongues of fire burned over the heads of the disciples, showing that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Just like wind, fire is a form of energy, energy that makes something happen. In confirmation class we talk about the use of the Greek letter *delta* in equations as a symbol of change. You take wood and put fire to it, and a change happens—the elements in the wood are transformed into ash and smoke, and energy is released that can cook a meal or power a locomotive. You light a fire in a kiln, and a wet clay pot with chalky looking paint hardens and turns colorful and glossy and useful.

This kind of power, expanded to Godly proportions, is what we’re told blew through that room on the first Pentecost, and it’s the power to which Christian people have witnessed ever since. So given that we are neither wood nor windmill, what is the effect of this kind of power on us? There are individuals here who can tell stories of the changes they believe the Holy Spirit has worked in their lives. But on this birthday of

the Church, I want to talk about changes in the life of the gathered Christian community, the congregation.

First is unification via language. Pentecost was and is a Jewish festival, and in Jerusalem there were Jews gathered from across Mediterranean—that long list of Bible place names we heard earlier. They didn't all speak the same language and couldn't understand each other. But when the wind blew through the room where the apostles of Jesus sat, all of a sudden, these who were all locals from Galilee began to speak in languages they had not known before. This is not speaking in tongues. This is like me starting to speak Chinese when I have no way of knowing how. The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, was now for everybody. Jesus' followers received the capacity to communicate in a new way, overcoming the usual barriers. And on the other side, those gathered around exclaimed that they were suddenly able to hear the message of God's mighty deeds of power.

Some have pointed out that this event of speaking and hearing reaches way back into the history of the people of Israel and reverses what happened in the story of the Tower of Babel. In that story, people who had apparently spoken the same language were confused and scattered and separated from each other. Their communication was cut off, and they couldn't understand each other. The event at Pentecost brings those scattered people back together. The Spirit unites the people by creating new communication.

There are things other than languages that divide Christian people in our day. We live in an increasingly polarized society, and those divisions are present in the

church as well. I saw this as I attended and watched our UM General Conference, which ended last week. It was full of inspiring words and worship and exciting plans for mission, things that made me proud to be United Methodist. But it was also a time for divisions between brothers and sisters in Christ, as the conference addressed a variety of controversial issues. People proposed new resolutions on immigration, abortion, and euthanasia. Probably the most charged was the debate over homosexuality. Our current language, and the language that was retained by this conference, says that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." And just as there were many who felt strongly about upholding those words, there were many others who sought ways to describe to the conference the painful impact of this policy on their own lives. As one person pro, and then one con, would get up to speak on a particular measure, I felt at times like they were talking on entirely different planes from one another. It reminded me of that term from geometry, "skew lines," or lines that have no chance of ever intersecting.

This is a painful place to be. It is hard and even scary to know that people in your community hold radically differing opinions on things you hold important, issues that can be very personal. And whereas at General Conference, we haul it all out every four years and talk it all over and vote on an official position, in the local church, we generally deal with this kind of thing by not talking about it at all. Many of us try not to talk about who we're going to vote for in the presidential election, unless we already know what the other person thinks. Many of us take great pains to steer clear of any topic that might be inflammatory.

There are times when we need to lay down our particular opinions for the sake of unity, when we need to be willing to not talk about something out of respect for the feelings of another. There are those times, but long term it is hard to be authentic with people with whom you cannot ever be real. And while so often church is just about the surface of our lives, I believe that what we really want, what we in fact yearn for, is to be real in the sight of God and one another. That is most possible in a diverse community of faith when we trust each other, when we've shared something of ourselves and our complexity with each other, and when in turn we've really stopped to listen without jumping to our own conclusions.

When we make a space for that kind of communication, even informally, even when we do not change each other's minds, we can find ourselves united in a deep and mysterious way. When we are willing to become vulnerable in telling our personal stories, and willing to become vulnerable in listening, it allows us to respect the dignity of the other, whatever our opinions, to have compassion for the other's experience, to assume that the other acts and speaks in good faith. In the midst of different perspectives, we're able to be real and stick together when we are humble in this way to one another. That kind of unity, that kind of communication in love is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a miracle of speaking and hearing and understanding, worked in us by the Spirit.

Now that is Transformation. That is what happens in Christian community that allows the Spirit to blow and burn and create new things. And what we find as we read on in Acts is that this awesome power of God that transforms us into real relationship

with each other also has a further goal—and this is point number three, in case you’ve lost count—a goal of pouring out a foundation for a common ministry that is passionate about changing the world. It is to spread Christ’s Good News of love and welcome and forgiveness and second chances and resurrection from the dead. We live in a world that is desperately hungry—physically, mentally, and spiritually—hungry for the Bread of Life. And we who have been fed at the table of grace, we who have come to know others and be known by them, we who have diverse gifts and perspectives, all placed in us by God’s good will—we are the ones God calls to learn to speak in new ways and to reach into places where we have never been.

I don’t know what you came here expecting today. But the Holy Spirit blows through us even now, sounding like a freight train and setting people on fire. God has promised to do the unexpected in us and with us, and we can trust the Spirit to empower us with as much love as we will need to be God’s people in the world.

I encourage you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, that we not be divided among ourselves. Is your heart right, as my heart is with yours? I ask no further question. If it be, give me your hand. For the sake of our opinions let us not destroy the work of God. Do you love and serve God? It is enough.

John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist”

“What are you planning to do that you cannot possibly achieve without help from beyond yourself? What do you feel God is calling you to be and do that is impossible without God’s intervention in your life?” (Bishop Reuben P. Job)