

Community of Reconciliation

sermon digest

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Acts 2:1-18
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Welcome to Grace Covenant's twelfth observance of Pentecost. As you prepared to come this morning, did you do so with anticipation, looking forward to the red splashes of color, celebrative music, and words of recollection and hope? Many of us grew up in congregations that did not make much of this day. As a matter of fact, many of us grew up in congregations that were positively frightened of this day. Word about the Spirit of God breaking out in the midst of the people, word about fire and wind and (worse) tongues were a bit too rowdy for us. It may have been comfortable in the church down the street, but not for us. We preferred a more predictable, straight-laced church experience. One of the writers I came across in preparing for this morning complained about moves to whittle Pentecost down to size. Noting the small, contained flames artists tended to depict alighting tamely on people's heads, he derided efforts to tone down the story, lest the Spirit frighten us by seeming out of our control.

And yet that is the very message of Pentecost. It is about God's Spirit bursting upon the church then and now irrespective of structures, hierarchies or status quo. It is about the Spirit's drive toward God's new creation in spite of the divisions posed by humanity's differing cultures, nationalities and languages. It is about barriers considered insurmountable falling one by one. It is not a calm, soothing story designed to put us to sleep. It is about a progression that involves abandonment of age-old suspicions and prejudices; and as you well know, such abandonment, such change, such an opening to a whole new world is unsettling. The story of Pentecost and the movement of God's Spirit is targeted to be earthshaking—so much so that we fear that the earth beneath our feet is literally crumbling.

Pentecost proclaims the creation of a wide and welcoming community of faith. Pentecost literally means the "fiftieth day." In the Jewish faith it refers to the Festival of Weeks and marks the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai some fifty days after Passover. Shavuot, meaning "Weeks," began at sundown last night for our Jewish neighbors and continues to sundown tomorrow.

On the Christian calendar, Pentecost falls fifty days after Easter and ten days after the ascension of Christ. Reminiscent of the Exodus story, Luke's account in Acts of the Christian Pentecost incorporates the elements of wind and fire, ancient symbols of God's presence, as Luke speaks of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in Jerusalem. Pentecost is often called the "birthday of the church," the point from which the church, newly empowered by God's Spirit, moves out of its hiding place in the upper room to proclaim the good news throughout the world in word and deed.

One of three festivals calling for pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Festival of Weeks or Shavuot would have seen a flood of people gathered in Jerusalem. The first century was a time when many faithful Jews scattered by the Diaspora across many nations were returning home. The diversity of geographic origins would have meant an accordingly diverse representation of languages. Most would have known Aramaic and Greek, the trade languages of the day; and yet Luke, the writer to whom we traditionally attribute the book of Acts, catalogues a wide assortment of nations, some of which we can trace to the first century and some we cannot, and records the people's amazement—"in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

The miracle of tongues—or as some prefer to say, the miracle of *hearing*—was, Aaron Kuecker suggests, both unnecessary (the people could have understood Peter's sermon in Aramaic or Greek) and "utterly necessary." Luke tells the story of Pentecost to demonstrate a fundamental truth about the good news of the gospel of Christ. The new community taking shape at Pentecost, the new community of Christ's church, is not based on common language or culture. The coming of God's Spirit does not eliminate human diversity. It *amplifies* it. The gospel of Christ reconciles humanity to God, *and* it reconciles humanity to one another. "For Luke," Kuecker observes, "the central work of the Spirit is the formation of a peacable community of reconciled difference—God's one new humanity, to use Paul's idiom—whose life and practice bear witness to the reign of God" ["The Spirit's Gift and Witness: Communities of Reconciled Difference," *Christian Reflection*, 55:16].

As Luke proceeds from Pentecost to spell out the implications of "this community of reconciled difference," he depicts a vision of salvation that extends to include not just Jews of differing regions, culture and language. Moving forward one tumultuous step at a time, this new community expands to include Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, slave and free. Admittedly, it is a story of building tension as again and again the young Christian community encounters those they have classified as "other" and must struggle with incorporating them into the body of Christ. Just at those

moments when the struggle is the hardest and threatens to undo the church, God's Spirit nurtures and empowers believers to take the next step. Take, for example, the action of the Council of Jerusalem. Following its deliberations, the apostles and elders, "with the consent of the whole church" take the momentous step of welcoming Gentiles as equal brothers and sisters to the new community of faith, and in a letter to the Gentile Christians affirm that their decision "has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28). Admittedly, the road ahead will have many twists and turns, some threatening to shake the community from its moorings, but Christ's church as a community of reconciliation opens itself to the differences and seeks to contain and even preserve those differences within the wide community of reconciliation that is to be Christ's church.

Christ's community of reconciliation bears witness in the face of the hostilities and divisions that afflict our world. Pentecost is about more than a backward look. It is also about the nature of the Christian community in our and every place and time. The story of this community is about the conversion of unbelievers—yes; but it is also about the ongoing conversion of those within the community. Just as Acts reveals those earliest Christians having to again and again go through the process of conversion to the ever farther reach of God's love in Christ, such has been the case as over the last two millennia as communities of faith have opened their doors to previously excluded neighbors and spoken up on behalf of the rights and needs of the poor and marginalized. Pentecost unfolds, in other words, as our understanding of the wide reach of God's love unfolds and the wind of God's spirit blows us into often uncomfortably new territory.

I have seen it happen, and you have, too, in our own shared, brief experience. Last Sunday evening's fellowship with our guests from the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge spoke to more than our just being a friendly people. It gave expression to our covenant understanding that although we encounter God in Christ, "we set no limit on the reach of God's love." We embrace our Jewish friends and neighbors in the full conviction that they know God and are known and loved by God even as we are.

Three years ago, we opened our doors to persons in our community who have low incomes or who are merely alone and in need of warmth and friendship. Our experience in getting to know our guests and their gifts and struggles has deepened and informed our understanding and experience of community. In June, one of them has offered to come and share with us on a Wednesday evening her experience of homelessness.

Another covenant commitment we made in starting our church was that we would be "an inclusive fellowship, welcoming all persons without regard to the outward distinctions by which the world separates, classifies, and discriminates." That commitment led us to be inclusive of persons of varying gender identities, and we started Same Difference, which eventually became PFLAG (Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Working to provide support to youth, adults and families facing hostility and discrimination in their work places and often in their places of worship, we have assisted with the planning and leadership of an annual Youth Pride Fest for area high school students. The students led our last PFLAG meeting; and hearing the words of gay and straight students about their efforts to prevent bullying, I was moved with appreciation for the students and their teachers and advisors and for the support we have been able to give them.

We celebrate the Pentecosts, the leading of God's Spirit which has taken us into new places in the past and look forward to the Pentecosts that lie ahead. It is a part of our unapologetic witness, for as Kuecker puts it,

When the people of God, by the power of the Spirit, live as a community of reconciled difference—where identity is shaped by our allegiance to Christ and diversity is not crushed in the name of unity—the very presence of the community bears witness to the universal lordship of the God made known in Christ" [55:16].

We are, you see, a community of reconciliation commissioned to the reconciling work of the Christ who came to make us one. May we be faithful to the honor and the task.