

“All Together In One Place”

Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler, Presbyterian Church in Leonia

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Acts 2:1-21

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Our Acts reading begins with togetherness, and what a remarkable day the Spirit has given us, gathering us together in one place, at long last, to worship in body *and* soul. When I was on vacation last week, when I saw my friends, we instinctively leaned into each other for a hug, and on the way in, paused and asked-- are we doing this? Are you okay hugging?-- it felt safe and more importantly, right, for us to hug these dear, old friends. Early in John’s gospel, we hear that The Word was made flesh, and it dwelt among us. We have shared lots of words virtually, but now we experience them in the flesh, as we see Christ dwelling among us today.

Our words from the Gospel are part of Jesus’ parting speech at the Last Supper. He warns the disciples that he would not be with them for long, in the flesh. “Now I am going to the One who sent me.” But even though Jesus would be returning to God, he promised to send-- after he was gone-- the Holy Spirit.

But who exactly *is* the Holy Spirit? Even some of our longest term members tell me they still puzzle over this part of the Trinity. For our gospel today, depending on what translation you read, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as an Advocate; as Companion; as a Comforter; as Counselor, and Helper. Jesus goes on to describe the Spirit of Truth. And in Acts, the Spirit gets described as coming with a rush of wind, tongues, and fire.

For a church that does not practice things like speaking in tongues, or spiritual trances, the Holy Spirit-- at least, in the ways this passage in Acts describes it-- might feel like the most unreachable person of the Trinity-- that is, God as Creator, God as Christ, and God as Holy Spirit. In fact, yesterday in Bible Study, one of our very-long time members confessed, “I have a pretty good grasp on God and on Jesus, but the Holy Spirit is still a mystery to me.”

We can look at the miracle that happened on Pentecost Sunday-- 50 days from the Passover-- that followers of Jesus Christ, all Galilleans, started speaking in the languages of every culture that had come to worship in that place. The good news of Jesus was not there only for those who had first heard it from Jesus. It was for the entire world.

Maybe we can compare our understanding of the Holy Spirit to learning another language. Anytime I am practicing another language, I try to treat the opportunity to speak a new language as an act of hospitality, to have another people’s words as guests in my mouth. In reality, *their* efforts at listening to *my* imperfect attempts at their language is probably the *real* act of hospitality.

Writer Debie Thomas says,

“If you are bilingual, then you know that there is nothing easy about substituting one language for another. Languages are intricate and messy. They carry the full weight of their respective cultures, histories, psychologies, and spiritualities. To attempt one language instead of another is to make oneself a learner, a servant, a supplicant. It is an act of exploration and of hospitality. To speak across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or politics is to challenge stereotypes and risk ridicule. It is a brave and disorienting act. A risky act.

But this is what the Holy Spirit required of Christ's frightened disciples on the birthday of the church. Essentially, she told them: Stop huddling in what you call safety. Throw open your windows and doors. Feel the pressure of my hand against your backs, pour yourselves into the streets you've come to fear, and speak! Don't you understand? Silence is no longer an option. You are on fire!”

If we take that invitation from the Holy Spirit often enough, at some point, we realize that language is not so foreign after all, but rather, it is a voice that has been within us longer than we have even been conscious. The voice of the Spirit is our mother-tongue; we just need to awaken in order to hear and remember.

We almost could have called yesterday Pentecost in our church, because the Holy Spirit was so active in it. We started the day with our morning Bible Study, which gave me food and fuel to get excited about these texts. That got cut short when Pat from our church office texted and asked, “Aren't you coming to the food pantry?” In a panic I jumped off the Bible Study zoom, leaving the class in Mel's capable hands, and rushed to the church, where clients coming to receive the food we would share had started lining up 45 minutes earlier than our scheduled opening. It wasn't a problem; our capable volunteers quickly showed up and were on the move. I saw Leonia neighbors. We saw people who had walked over from other towns. We saw friends who have been part of our English Conversation classes. In the act of sharing food, I heard our church members communicating with clients in English, Spanish, Korean and Japanese, and it occurred to me that our Acts scripture says, “Each one heard them communicating in the native language of each.” Maybe our church *does* speak in tongues, after all! And this sharing of food yesterday, made possible by Center for Food Action-- what a spirited appetizer it was for the sharing of Holy Communion today!

Later yesterday afternoon, we held a bible workshop for our second graders, as they prepare to receive their 3rd Grade Bibles in June. They learned the basics of looking up chapters and verses in their bibles, and also some tools to use the bible as inspiration in times of struggle or need. They are just beginning what we hope will be an odyssey of discovery of this amazing story of the Spirit's work in our lives.

I don't know about you, but I am feeling the breath of the Holy Spirit in our church and our lives today, and also in the grace that at last we can breathe easier with the lowering risk of the pandemic. I rejoice that our baptismal font flows with water again, and we can soon look one

another in the eye as we share Christ's meal together. As followers of the incarnate Christ, we need that bodily experience of one another, especially after so long apart.

That is not to say that the Holy Spirit can't reach us through virtual experiences. We have some worshipping with us today online. And I have seen so many holy moments through the worship you have participated in, through our virtual services. I have counted our church blessed each Sunday with the amazing music that has been shared. Each church season, we have stretched ourselves to be creative and to try things that might not have been done within the walls of the sanctuary-- and so we have had children reciting Psalms by the water; we have seen some of you post your communion elements from your own homes; and you have responded quickly to offer support financially or emotionally when an email has gone out that another member needs care due to the pressures of the pandemic. Plus, there may be one or two evening meetings that can still be attended from the comforts of your home. I imagine that seeing what we can do online will help us rethink how technology can be a tool for the Holy Spirit to reach us in church life to come.

I think Jesus wanted to leave the message with his disciples and those who would follow after him that even when he cannot be among them physically, through the Holy Spirit, they are given-- we are given-- a virtual experience of Jesus, in flesh and blood. Our sacraments, we say, are a **visible** and **exterior** sign of an **invisible** and **interior** grace. Something happens to you when you share the meal, and receive the blessing of water, that words alone cannot describe. These spiritual gifts nourish, replenish, and transform us. Made new, we can then partner with God in dreaming of the world made new.

All together in one place. Praise the Spirit for calling us to *this* place! But, pay attention, Christian people: The impact of the Spirit does not end here. You are on fire now. What is yet to come will be the true marks of the Spirit on this church. I can't wait to witness what will come of this place, these people, and this faith.