

Pentecost, 5.31.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

“One Spirit, One Body, Many Gifts”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Today is Pentecost, the third great festival in the Christian year. On Pentecost we give thanks for gift of the Holy Spirit, who enlivens the church and every believer, in every language, and in every culture. On Pentecost we celebrate and give thanks for one Spirit. There are not separate Holy Spirits for different groups: one for North Americans, one for Africans, one for Asians, one for Europeans. As Paul writes, *“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”* There is one Spirit, one body, and many gifts. The one Holy Spirit is given to everyone who calls upon the Name of the Lord. The one Holy Spirit empowers believers for Christ’s mission in the world.

Paul’s words about unity and difference reveal an important truth about God. God’s truth is always revealed in paradox. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. Christ is both human and divine. As Christ’s followers we are both sinner and saint; we are both judged and redeemed; we both die and are raised with Jesus. There is one body, broken for the world. The truth of Christianity and of our life in the body is lived out in the paradox of this unity and difference.

Yet this is not the way we hear things in the world. In the world, truth is rarely expressed in its complexity and contradiction. The truth is rarely expressed in paradox. The media tells us the “truth,” but only part of it. Rather than complexity, truth is simplified into “either-or” statements.

Yet God’s truth about us and the world is much more complex than the world’s truth about itself. Today we celebrate a truth about God that cannot be looked at under a microscope or prerecorded, yet it is a truth verifiably alive in the world. God’s truth is immediate and complex, like the day of Pentecost in Acts: *“suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent 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.”*

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all understand the truth about one another? We know how hard mutual understanding is in daily life. At times, it can feel almost impossible. Even people who speak the same language often cannot understand one another. In our world, people shout at one

another and threaten one another. People cry out in pain for help and assistance, and are often ignored. Powerful loud voices bellow away in the world, hoping to convince and lead by the sheer volume and violence of their words. Though we know we should cooperate for peace and justice, nations continue in conflict one another. This is why Christ sends the Holy Spirit into the world.

On Pentecost many different people were gathered together. It was truly a complex multi-ethnic and international gathering. Acts tell us there were “*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.*” There were ancient misunderstandings and prejudices among these groups. Yet in the unity of the Holy Spirit they were amazed and astonished at their ability to understand one another. They asked, “*How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? What does this mean?*”

We all know how important communication is. We also know how hard it is to be impartial. Yet we often come with our minds made up about issues. The English word “prejudice” comes from the Latin *praejudicium*, meaning to “pre-judge.” As you know I worked in Japan for much of my adult life. The Japanese word for prejudice is “*henken*” (偏見), meaning “to look at from only one side.” A very hard truth about human beings is that we make up our minds about many things in advance. We often look at issues from only one side. Looking at the world from only one perspective, we prejudice things and people. We rarely look at things in their complexity, and if we throw nationalism, politics, and economics into the mix, it becomes very hard for most of us to remain objective and even handed. We like to think we are open-minded, until we get into an argument. We may even say things we come to regret, wishing we could retract them and start over.

So imagine with me the story of Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. People from many nations and ethnic groups were gathered in one place. These groups were separated by language, culture, and ethnic identities. In the early church Jewish and gentile Christians looked at one another with suspicion. Jewish Christians thought gentiles should first convert to Judaism, and gentiles saw no reason to do this because Christ is the mediator of the new covenant. With such potential for disunity, how could there ever be unity in the body, the church?

Yet the Holy Spirit gave them the gift of listening with discernment, allowing them to be recreated into a new body - the church. They could listen, understand, and accept one another. They each saw their difference, not as something that separated them, but as something that made unity

possible. Unity is always created out of difference. This is the truth and paradox of the church: we share unity while celebrating our many different gifts. The church is “one Spirit, one body, and many gifts.” Together we work for a common mission in the world.

Paul writes, “*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” The Christian Church works toward the common good of both the church and the world. All of our gifts are necessary for God’s mission in the world. Yet anyone who has been around the church also knows how easy it is for churches to be fractured and splintered by difference. This happens because we also remain captive to sin.

Paul describes the paradox of the church as one body with many members. Christ’s body contains both unity and diversity. “*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*” Ethnicity, nation of origin, social status, gender, and all of the modern identities that could potentially bring disunity, become things that strengthen the body, the church. As sinful people, we are tempted to put other spirits above Christ - the spirit of the age, and the spirits of culture, nation, and political identity.

The good news is that God values each person; God forgives and loves each person; and God uses the gifts of each person in God’s mission to the world. We are made into this body, not by our doing, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit we have been made friends and coworkers in the kingdom with many people we would have never otherwise met.

In today’s gospel, Jesus promises us living water, flowing from our hearts. In Holy Baptism, we are baptized with the Spirit, we drink of one Spirit, and are made into one body, the church. These baptismal waters flow in our hearts, renewing us, and encouraging us in mission for the common good of the world. One in the Spirit, we offer our unique gifts for God’s mission in the world.

I encourage you to take time today for prayer. In the midst of the noise of the world, I encourage you to listen for God’s still small voice. It is there; it is within you already. God does not shout over the noise of the world. God waits for us to quiet ourselves to hear God’s still small voice. Turn off your technology, quiet yourself, and prayerfully invite the Holy Spirit into your hearts once again.

The world will never tell you to quiet yourself. Though the world does not know the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit makes us the church in the world. We must listen for the Spirit to be led by the Spirit. May the Holy Spirit renew us - recreate us - so that, together, we might offer our gifts for God’s mission in the world. Together we are “one Spirit, one body, many gifts.” Amen.