

The UMC of Berea
1 Corinthians 12.4-12; Acts 2.1-21
Day of Pentecost

Today, we celebrate the Festival of Pentecost: the climax of the Great Fifty Days of Easter, fulfilling the power of Christ's resurrection through the outpouring of God's transformative power in the Holy Spirit, giving birth to this practicing beloved community we call "church."

The Pentecost story of our birth—of the arrival, the outpouring, the gift of the Holy Spirit—is one of the most dramatic stories in the New Testament. It is dynamic and designed to touch each of our senses, filled as it is with stunning, powerful imagery: "the howling of a fierce wind" and "individual flames of fire"—elements of nature that need to be respected, handled with care, for they can be quite dangerous and destructive as well as life-giving.

We find the disciples this morning—like us—now ten days out from Jesus' ascension, fifty days out from Jesus' resurrection. And the disciples—like us—are carrying with them and among them Jesus' promise that he will never leave them alone, that he will send the Holy Spirit to be their advocate and steadfast companion.

They are "all together in one place"—much as we long to be. And folks from all over the place are gathered in Jerusalem, too: gathered in the holy city for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, celebrating both the wheat harvest and God's gift of Torah—the set of instructions—given through Moses to the people at Mount Sinai. And then, from heaven comes a sound "like the howling of a fierce wind," filling "the entire house where they were sitting." They see what look like "individual flames of fire" burning on each of their heads, and they're all "filled with the Holy Spirit" and changed forever.

WE are told that at the sound of the wind and the fire and the disciples all speaking "as the Spirit enabled them to speak," a crowd gathers, and they are mystified—bewildered, surprised, and amazed—because each of them is able to hear and to understand: to receive the good news—the gospel—about God's deeds of power as they have never received it before.

From its birth, we are reminded the church is multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual. The Holy Spirit frees the mouths of the first believers to witness to all nationalities, all tongues, all ethnicities, and all cultures. The great gift of Pentecost is to push through our barriers, to tear down our walls, to share and to understand across our differences.

All who are there comprehend the message of the gospel—the good news of God's inexhaustible, unconditional love—not only in the common languages of their time and place but in a language that cuts through to the human heart. For on that Day of Pentecost, the differences of language and accent and regional dialect—who knows? maybe even political party and religious affiliation and economic standing—all their divisions are overcome by the Holy Spirit that breaks all kinds of barriers all the time.

But notice: folks do not lose their differences, do not lose their identity. They do not all start speaking the same language or acting all the same. It is not their diversity that is wiped away; it is their illusion of superiority based on those differences and their refusal to cross those boundaries. They do not become the same; they become one—united while maintaining, while celebrating their diversity—one with all who hear and understand that God is alive and God is active in the world and eager that all of them—that all of us—should participate in God's loving purposes.

And so, each year on this festival day, we celebrate again the coming of the Holy Spirit. And we experience again our need to renew our faith in God's purposes. The Holy Spirit poured out on the Day of Pentecost is poured out on each of us: through the waters of our baptism, through our sharing in communion—through all our worshiping and praying, studying and serving—and all the other ways we live out our faith, not just resting in what we *believe* about God but committing ourselves to *behave* in particular, peculiar ways, too.

For it is not only in our *beliefs* but also in our boundary-crossing *behaviors* that we are joined into the unity of Christ's body: a unity we celebrate around the world today—a unity based upon our shared faith in who God is and what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do.

Borrowing words from the prophet Joel, Peter reminds us of something we must always remember—not just on the Day of Pentecost but every day. Peter reminds us that the church, from its birth, is meant to be a big dreamer: to dream big dreams for God and to live into God's dream for this world. The church, from its birth, is to be a visionary change agent: never complacent, never comfortable. The church, from its birth, is meant to “see visions” and to “dream dreams.”

Peter—the rock upon whom the church is built—on the Day of Pentecost—the church's birthday—declares it is so. The church always must be dreaming God's big dream: of a beloved community, of a world set right. For when our dreams become too small—or altogether absent—when we become self-satisfied or satisfied with the status quo—then we stop being church, the body of Christ. We must always be a place of possibility: a communion of real, radical hope.

Beloved, the Spirit still is blowing in this place—not just this building but in each of us: our hearts, our minds, our bodies: wherever and whenever we dream together and with God. And that Spirit continues to pour out upon us wisdom and power, courage and conviction, and prophetic gifts beyond our imaginations.

In a letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul clarifies that God gives these gifts “to each person *for the common good*.” The Holy Spirit empowers each of us *so that* we may bless and serve our communities faithfully. The gifts of the Spirit are nothing if they aren't used toward building a more just, more peaceable world. And if we forget that—as is our habit, fooling ourselves into thinking that what we have is the result of our own efforts—if we forget that, then even our very good intentions can be corrupted in order to promote our own ego, our own personal good.

Sisters and brothers in Christ—each of us a beloved child of God, in whom the Spirit still is breathing, still is pouring out gifts, still is setting us ablaze—we live in a time of great tension and division, a time of brokenness and fear in almost every aspect of our lives. Gross injustices, generational inequalities, deep-seeded misogyny and white supremacy and heterosexism woven into the fabric of our society, bubbling to the surface in tragic ways again and again and again. Widespread poverty, disease, hunger, gun violence—a lack of real leadership and a failure of nerve. Ours is a violent, uncertain, narcissistic, and unpredictable world.

Each new day seems to bring with it a new tragedy, news of yet another incident of senseless loss of life. There is a deep, deep need in our world for love and kindness, for peace and compassion, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation: real reconciliation that musters the

courage to reckon with and repent from the sins of our collective past and present and to move forward in decidedly different ways.

Be assured, church, these are not “nice ideas” that can be put off until some vague and distant future. No, they are what we are called to be and to do as the body of Christ. The world needs God’s healing love—right now, today. The urgency of God’s message of forgiveness and redemption, healing love and just peace, is as great now, on this Day of Pentecost, as it has ever been.

So, on this Day of Pentecost, may we celebrate the arrival—the outpouring—of God’s Spirit. But may our Pentecost celebration be far more than the commemoration of some past event. The presence of the Holy Spirit is given to us as a constant reminder that God is with us—that God is calling us—that God is sending us and changing us and using us to make a real difference in this world. The Holy Spirit is our constant reminder that the mission of the church in every time and place is to restore all people to unity with God and with each other in Christ.

By God’s grace, may we do this: as we pray and worship, proclaim the gospel and work toward justice, peace, and love. You and I—and all of us together—are empowered to be part of God’s vision of shalom—part of God’s beloved community—as we go about our daily lives. For we are members of one another, and we are called to work together using our different gifts—toward the common good—so that those who experience the gospel through us—the good news of God’s inexhaustible, unconditional, justice-seeking, peace-making love—can say as those long ago: “We hear them declaring in our own languages the mighty works of God!” Thanks be to God. Amen.