

1 Corinthians 12:1-13 & Acts 2:1-4 - Pentecost

The Holy Spirit Comes

According to Paul's letter, diversity and division characterize the membership in the church at Corinth. While diversity is commendable and even required, in Paul's view, the social ruptures created are not. Up to this point in the letter, Paul commented on factions, denouncing them as forces that destroy, rather than unify and strengthen the community.

Yet, for Paul, not all divisions are bad and destructive. The divisions instituted by God and the Spirit within the community, particularly in service to its worship and fellowship life, have merit. Paul lists the different ways God's one Spirit works within the community. The reality is that there is one Spirit of God at work in many forms. Whether it's diversity in serving, gifts, or workings, God is the source of it all. God and God's Spirit are the ultimate equalizers in a community prone to competition and sorting itself according to power and social hierarchies.

In terms of the gifts, Paul lists the ways that the Spirit of God works in their midst. Like a seasoned persuasive communicator, Paul names first the gifts most cherished and palatable to his Corinthian audience – wise advice, and special knowledge, very strong elements that are the mainstay of the community.

In addition to wise advice and special knowledge, Paul lists additional manifestations of the Spirit that are in service to the common good of all: power to perform miracles, ability to prophesy, ability to discern if the message is from the Spirit of God or some other spirit, the ability to speak unknown languages and their interpretation.

The source of all these gifts, services, and manifestations is God's Spirit. This Spirit is not just the source of the diversity inside the community. This spirit is also the common denominator among each member. It is not the manifestation of the Spirit that is the priority, in Paul's estimation. The most important feature is what those manifestations are to accomplish – namely oneness in the community. The appearance of the Spirit in their midst is to demonstrate the power of God to unify

people in the midst of diversity. That diverse unity is what draws the world.

The Pentecost story in Acts shines a light on what Paul is telling the Corinthians. The powerful proclamation of Acts was public and disruptive. It moved people outside the community to pay attention and drew their unsuspecting gazes, curiosity, and astonishment. The Day of Pentecost was not so much about a change in God – the Spirit being “poured out” – as it was about a change in people – a new ability to perceive and experience the presence and activity of God’s Spirit.

But, maybe we have the Pentecost event completely wrong. We’ve heard the story of the wind and the tongues-of-flame and the crowds hearing the sermon in their own languages just enough to believe that the promise of Pentecost is deliverance, celebrations, victory and strength. The signs of Pentecost, after all, are mighty. And what is the Holy Spirit if it is not God’s own agent – the very Spirit of the resurrected Jesus – now on earth to accompany us with signs of wonder and power.

Except that *precisely* because the promised Holy Spirit is the presence of the *crucified* and resurrected Christ, we should never expect things to be so easy. In the cross of Christ, we see God’s strength mediated through suffering, God’s victory achieved through defeat, and new life pledged and provided through death. The crucified and resurrected God we meet in Jesus is a God of paradox, and so we should look for no less in God’s Holy Spirit.

This presents us with two of the paradoxes of Pentecost. First, *the Holy Spirit does not come to solve our problems but to create them*. Consider this: absent the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples could go back to their previous occupations as fishermen. You can almost hear James and John explaining, “Sure, it was a wild and crazy three-year-ride, and that Jesus sure was a heck of a guy, but maybe we needed to get that out of our system before we could settle down and take on Dad’s business.” Once the Spirit comes, that return to normality is not an option.

They will now be propelled throughout the ancient world to proclaim the unlikely message that God has redeemed the world through an itinerant preacher from the backwaters of Palestine who was executed for treason and blasphemy. The Holy Spirit, doesn't solve the disciples' problems, rather, it creates them.

New York Times columnist David Brooks once challenged new college graduates to forsake the American obsession with self-fulfillment and instead find themselves in service to others by making and keeping what he described as sacred commitments and by rising to the challenges they discover all around and outside of them.

“Most successful young people, he writes, “don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life ... Most people don't form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling.”

The same is true of a community. Our congregations will not discover themselves until they give themselves away. No amount of time spent on developing a mission statement or devising new member campaigns can be a substitute for looking around one's neighbourhood and asking, “Who needs us?” and “What can we do with our resources to show God's love to this part of the world?”

The second Paradox: *The Holy Spirit doesn't prevent failure but invites it.* Or, to put it slightly differently, *the Holy Spirit invites us to find fulfillment and victory in and through our setbacks and failures.* Although perhaps inspired by the Mission Control dictum during the crisis of Apollo 13 that “failure is not an option,” that kind of mindset is paralysing too many of our congregations. Failure is not only an option, it is inevitable. The problems that this world, and our congregations face, are too great, too complex, and too significant to imagine that we will hit upon the best solution the first time out ... or maybe ever. Once we've identified a worthy challenge, we must experiment ... and count on failing, innovate ... and count on failing, invent ... and count on failing again.

An English teacher told her students, “Make a mistake every day – just not the same mistake!” Each mistake, each setback, each false start, each failure is not to be lamented but learned from. Living in a success-obsessed world can lead us to forget this – ultimately it’s neither about us nor up to us. God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of this cosmos, and only God can bring the kind of redemption we long for and need. Our job is to partner with God’s work wherever we can discern it.

If the cross teaches us nothing else, it teaches that success will not always look like success, and victory may often come disguised as defeat. The question isn’t whether we’re successful, but whether we’re faithful. Or, as Cornell West (American philosopher, intellectual, academic, author) once said, “Sure it’s a failure, but was it a *good* failure.”

This perspective grants a measure of freedom to throw ourselves into lost causes, to place ourselves on the side of those who are most vulnerable, and to take risks and dare great ventures. Why? Because we trust that whatever the immediate results of our efforts, both our hopes and our future are secured not by our abilities but by God’s good promise. Resurrection, we need to remember, only and always follows crucifixion.

The Scriptures are clear that the Spirit has always been present, active and available on earth and in human affairs. From the creation moment in which God’s Spirit was “hovering over the surface of the waters,” to the Psalmist’s cry, “Where can I go from your Spirit? / Where can I flee from your presence?” The Old Testament bears constant witness to the Spirit’s presence. But, if this is true, what was the amazing occurrence that happened on that Pentecost Day? We may never know for certain exactly what the disciples experienced, but we can also know what it means for us today. And at its heart, the Pentecost moment was about a new insight, a new openness, a new perception and a new capacity to experience the presence and power of God’s Spirit.

To these disciples, the sound of the wind would have been reminiscent of Ezekiel’s

prophecy of the valley of dry bones, in which God's people were reassured that even the Temple's destruction and their exile from their homeland could not separate them from God's Spirit. The flames that rested on each head would have reminded them of the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the desert. And as their eyes and hearts were opened to the Spirit's presence and activity within and among them, they were able to draw on God's power as never before, and they finally began to understand God's Kingdom as Jesus had been trying to describe for so long.

The fact that this event happened at this festival, at Pentecost, would not have been lost on these believers. This was an agricultural feast – the end of the barley harvest and the start of the wheat harvest – a celebration of thanksgiving for another year of provision and a time of prayer for a successful gathering-in of the harvest to come. But, it was also a time to commemorate the giving of the law at Sinai, fifty days after the Passover and the escape of the Israelite slaves from Egypt.

For the gathered disciples of Christ, the words about the fields being ripe for harvest that Jesus spoke must have rung in their ears. For these believers who had heard Jesus preach and had seen his works, the new law (or rather the fulfilled law) that he had taught them (like the Sermon on the Mount) was now being written, not on tablets of stone, but, as Jeremiah prophesied, on their hearts. And because of this "baptism" in the Holy Spirit, these disciples saw God's Kingdom being revealed as they could never have believed it up to that point. In fact, so radical was the vision that they saw on that day, that even after the fact, they still struggled to understand and enact what they saw and experienced.

In his sermon in Acts, Peter quoted Joel's promise that the Spirit would be poured out on "all people" and that "everyone" who calls on God's name would be saved. But, perhaps it was only later, as he received his vision of the sheet of food descending from heaven, and then was asked to preach to a gathering of Gentiles, that he really understood how radically inclusive this Kingdom – and the Spirit who enabled them to live it – really was. And once they had begun to recognise how

all-embracing God's grace and love were, they could not help themselves.

The disciples proclaimed it in whatever way they could; they lived it daily and they spread the message to the whole world as it was then known, drawing in women – both married and widows, as members and leaders - eunuchs, slaves, Gentiles, soldiers, revolutionaries and even those, like Saul, who were committed Pharisees and deeply opposed to the way of Christ.

There can be no question, after reading this story, that God's Spirit is unrestrainedly available and active in human affairs. What we need is not so much an "outpouring" of the Spirit as an awakening to the Spirit's power and presence, and to the Kingdom of God that the Spirit opens to us, that welcomes and embraces all people in Christ's name.

The only question we need to answer as we worship this Pentecost Sunday is this: Are we willing to have our eyes and hearts opened in this way? Are we willing to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by a vision of God's radically inclusive Kingdom, and to begin to live it out through Spirit-empowered acts of welcome, compassion, grace, service and invitation? Are we ready to have Christ's law of love written on our hearts, to have our way illumined by the Spirit's fire and to be blown into surprising and unexpected relationships by the wind of the Spirit?

The Acts story of Pentecost portrayed how the appearance of the Spirit transformed the proclaimers from a motley band of spineless disciples into a diverse and powerful people, who grab the attention of everyone in their proximity. The manifestations of the Spirit transform members and their communities into spaces that ignite conviction and change people's life directions. Its purpose is to embolden a community to realize it is not about the preservation or prestige of the community or its individual members that is of significance. Rather, the importance is on how effective the change on the inside of the community -- with its embrace of a diverse and heterogeneous membership that is empowered by God to do great things -- impacts and infects the world outside of it.

The Corinthians passage invites us into the process of imagining our communities as something different than current realities of competition, factions, and fractures. Instead of reading the story of the Corinthian Church as a message to strive for our own spiritual encounters in which each of us masters our own working of the Spirit, we should read it as a communal commitment to serve God mightily in this world.

First Corinthians combined with Acts challenges us to shift from our personal ambitions to the vision of God's collective. Empowered by God's Spirit, we are called to be committed, as communities of faith, to mastering our diverse showings so that the world encounters God's many sounds, colours, activities, services, and gifts and knows that God loves and accepts them all as creations of God.

Amen.

THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

PENTECOST SUNDAY, May 19, 2024

Empowering God, you gave the church the abiding presence of your Holy Spirit. Look upon your church today and hear our petitions.

God of wind and flame, blow into our lives. Ignite the fire of hope, fan the flames of possibility. Transform us into a people who share your love with a world fractured and in pain. Embolden us to be people who proclaim your hope into a world given to despair. Make us a people who live trusting and believing we can participate in making the world into the kin-dom that is to come. Come Holy Spirit, fill our lives with your presence - so that more and more every day, all that we do and say and hope will be an act of worship to you and an expression of love to others, to the glory of your name.

God of Creation, remind us what is ours to do, what is our responsibility in working together with others in the healing of your Creation and the renewal and sustainability of the land. Bring your healing presence to the communities and regions of our province and our country impacted by wildfires brought on by continuing drought conditions. Bring refreshing rains to quench fires and raise hope in those awaiting word that they may return home. Make us a people who appreciate and cherish the beauty of your world: its mountains and forests, its lakes, rivers and streams, its creatures of every kind, with whom we share this fragile planet that is crying for restoration, especially the Coral Reef, bleaching at record levels, globally caused by exceedingly high ocean temperatures.

Baptizing God, who calls us to be a baptizing community, you speak to us in many languages over the course of our lives: the burbles and laughs and wails of infancy; the indistinct speech and partial words of the toddler; the strange syntax and slang of late childhood and adolescence; the full language of adulthood; the quavering speech and muted tones of old age. Speak to us in the language that we need to hear today; hear us in the language that we speak.

God of many languages, you sing the language of joy with us, you join us in the dance of life. Hear all of your children who sing and dance and praise this morning: those who celebrate new life with all the possibilities of the future; those who celebrate relationships, both the new and exciting and the

comforting familiarity experienced in longer term relationships; those for whom the awe and wonder of life completely fills their whole being. May they hear your voice joining in the singing and the shouting.

God of life, you also speak the languages of pain, of sorrow, of fear, of despair. Hear all your children who speak, who wail, who whisper in these languages: those who find themselves in hospital beds, or waiting anxiously beside those beds; those who gather at a graveside to say that longer farewell. Today we pray for Bishop Larry Kochendorfer and his family as they gather to celebrate a life well lived at the death of his father; those who worry about where the next meal, or the next rent cheque, will come from; those who live in places where peace is just a word, a faint hope, a distant dream. May all those whose language is rent by pain hear you lamenting with them.

God of peace, our warring world is in chaos. Inspire your people to seek peace; in Ukraine and Russia, in Gaza and Israel, in Sudan and Haiti. Teach us to love our enemies, to put away our aggressions and weapons, and to remember the price paid for our freedom, the precious lives lost, and the painful devastation leaving many homeless forcing them to become refugees.

God of compassion, we remember and pray for the people of Brazil and Afghanistan who were impacted by flash floods leaving hundreds dead, and homes and communities in ruin; for the people of Indonesia, where they continue to search for bodies through the rubble caused by flash floods. Bring needed provisions and support to them as they begin the difficult work of rebuilding their lives and their communities.

God of our congregations, inspire and encourage bishops, pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and lay leaders in their leadership roles. Fill with your Holy Spirit: Bishops Anna, Linda, Susan and Kathy; newly ordained Pastor Elina Singh, Grace Lutheran and South Peace United in Dawson Creek - Rev. Marilyn Carroll (United), Deo Lutheran in Salmon Arm - Rev. Erik Bjorgan, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, and the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

God of Pentecost, God who speaks with many tongues; God who makes God-self known in many ways; fill us with your Spirit this and every morning. Hear the prayers we share using many different languages. Stir up your

power, Lord Christ, and come. In your mercy receive our prayers, and by your power hasten the day when peace and justice kiss and steadfast love and faithfulness meet for the sake of the world you love. We pray in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the one we call Christ, whose life, death and resurrection shows us the path to your Kin-dom.

Amen.

God in Community, Holy in One, make us one Body from many individuals, as we pray together the pray Jesus taught us, saying,

Our Father ...