

Happy Birthday!

Pentecost Sunday, Mother's Day

Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

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Whoosh...

That impractical word tries to describe the events of Pentecost. That "electricity in the air" moment of the Holy Spirit during the third overtime of an NCAA final four basketball game, as I mentioned here a few weeks ago. Spirit. Power. Wind. Tongues of fire. Whoosh.

Often in the Biblical narrative God's actions are recorded as more of a private affair. They are solitary conversations with people in secluded places, like with Moses on Mount Sinai or with Jesus on Mount Tabor or with Mary Magdalene in the empty tomb. They happen when the person is either alone or with only a few other persons nearby.

But the Pentecost story is for everyone. There are no outsiders.

Violent wind and energizing spirit and especially tongues of fire are pretty visible – as depicted on the banner above the organ wall behind Mick and me. Pentecost is not some quiet conversation in an out-of-the-way place or a personal inner mystical experience. Pentecost is not some private moment on the deck looking at the sunrise with a good cup of coffee. Pentecost is not some easy continuation of the status quo, but a new situation that will demand new responses and offer new challenges.

In the Gospel reading we hear that Jesus appears to the disciples – the context is after the crucifixion and before the ascension. The city of Jerusalem would have been on edge and there was great tension among the religious layers of society. And that is also the context for the phrase "*for fear of the Jews*" that needs to be countered every time we hear it with the more accurate phrase "*for fear of the religious authorities.*"

But in that upper room was a pre-Pentecost story of spirit – not so much a mighty wind but a personal breath, as we hear: "*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'*"

Two summers ago, David and I were in Jerusalem on Pentecost Sunday. Our group from the Tantur Ecumenical Institute was encouraged to visit local congregations on Sundays, on our own and via public transportation. Our first Sunday there was Pentecost, and five of us ventured to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City – or the walled city that is known by its Armenian, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim quarters.

We walked through the maze of narrow streets further and further into the old city and by following my hazy 25-year-old memory and current church bells, we located and worshiped in this particular setting that is in and over a former church building from the time of the Crusades. It is a timeless place of stones and arches and windows and bells. There are Arabic, Danish, English, and German-speaking congregations that share the same facility at different times – not unlike our English and Chuukese sharing that goes on here at St. Paul's.

The English-speaking congregation, with whom we worshiped, was made up of folk from all over the world and who were simply working or traveling there, or assigned through one of the agencies of the United Nations, or on missionary appointment as teachers or health workers or agriculture specialists mainly with Palestinians in Jerusalem or the West Bank. The worship service and its liturgy were fairly similar to what we experience here, that is until the reading from the Book of Acts. When that time came about twenty folk stood up and read that passage at the same time, and each in a different language. I have never seen anything quite like that. The diversity and differences of language were as apparent as they have ever been for me. I don't suppose I can ever hear the stories of Pentecost or the Tower of Babel, for that matter, without thinking of this experience.

And, on another level, this diversity – this pluralism, if you will, is what I carry with me from that time.

One way of looking at diversity that might be helpful and hopefully interesting is to look at the stoles that you see me wear over time...

Stoles

Diversity. Today is Pentecost. It is the birthday of the church. And it is Mother's Day. Early Christians incorporated a Roman festival on the fourth Sunday of Lent, honoring Jesus' mother Mary.

Contemporary Mother's Day started in the United States nearly 150 years ago when Anna Jarvis, an Appalachian homemaker, organized a day to raise awareness of poor health conditions in her community, a cause she believed would best be advocated by mothers. She called it "Mother's Work Day."

Fifteen years later, Julia Ward Howe, a Boston poet, pacifist, suffragist, and author of the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," organized a day encouraging mothers to rally for peace, since she believed that they bore the loss of life more harshly than anyone else.

But when I think of Pentecost – and of diversity – my mind returns to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a place – in memory and even today – of diverse cultural and religious experience. There is an amazing amount of religious variety and vitality – both within and between religions. I don't know how to be exposed to that city – let alone live there

for a time – and continue to think that “my way” of belief is the only way. We hear so much of this, but more often than not I believe that “my way or the highway” is a way of continuing to hold onto prestige or power, and religion too often is a convenient ruse for this cause.

At the close of the Pentecost story Peter gives a sermon about the joy that they have experienced through knowing Jesus the Christ. It is “his” way and the way of those friends and followers. And it is appropriate to share what is exciting and healing and hopeful. In the Biblical narrative it then becomes the way of many who hear the story and are impressed by the Pentecost wind and spirit and tongues of fire.

Pentecost. Diversity. Whoosh. The ancient harvest festival of Pentecost, which remembered the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Sinai, was celebrated fifty days after Passover. It is still celebrated in Judaism today. In the Christian story of Pentecost, it marks the giving of new life and the gift of the church, and is celebrated fifty days after Easter. But that doesn’t mean our way – the Christian way – is the right way for everyone. It is but one way – one path of many paths to truth.

God’s Pentecost covenants with both Jews and Christians, for example, remain valid and meaningful and complimentary. A later covenant does not rescind the former. And this would also include Muslims who follow us, the other “people of the book.” May we take our understandings from a God who makes clear to all of us God’s love and our promise as children of God. We are all included because the Pentecost story is offered for everyone. There is diversity. But there are no outsiders. Amen.

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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 – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."