

Pentecost Sunday
Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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A few weeks ago our readings talked about Jesus as the good shepherd. For us urban dwellers this image of shepherding might have been difficult to connect with. Today, though, we may be able to connect with ease because it's about city living.

The author of Acts, who is believed to be the author of Luke, sets today's narrative in Jerusalem. Many different people had gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. In Judaism Pentecost is known as the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot and comes seven weeks or fifty days after Passover. This Jewish festival was an agricultural celebration focused on God's gift of the law coming down from Mount Sinai. This gift came after the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, and occurred when Moses went on top of the mountain and received the Ten Commandments. Remember, this was a time when Judaism was a tribal society and perhaps would encounter a glowing volcano that signified God's presence. But, in Acts we know that the tents of the wilderness were not large enough for this bigger population. Instead, people now lived in cities, with others who were surprisingly different. Gathered in that busy city all of the sudden people saw tongues of fire dispersed onto the head of each believer. No longer was the fire far away on a mountaintop, but instead it was among the people. As magnificent as these dancing

flames might have been this wasn't the only thing that happened. So too they heard a diversity of languages.

This multiplicity of language drags us back to our first reading from Genesis. In this reading we heard a story about a tower. There were people of one language who wished to build a tower that everyone will envy. One scholar notes that a traditional understanding of this story is to emphasize the human arrogance and the punishment from God that follows. However, recent scholarship has placed this interpretation into question. What's clear is that the story of Babel deals with the origins of cultural difference, not with pride and punishment.

Let me mention a few things to hammer home this interpretation before making a key connection to Pentecost. In Genesis the goal of the building project was to keep everyone in the same place, so that they wouldn't be scattered over the earth - people with one language wanted to stay in one place. We understand that in Chicago. Think about the many different ethnic enclaves of Poles, Chinese, Italians, Koreans, and Latinos. Generally, we're comfortable in similarity.

The builders of this tower in Genesis wanted to make a name for themselves. Let me clarify that statement though: "In the Bible, making a name for oneself is never used to describe self-centeredness or pride. Rather, making a name implies an act of establishing an identity that will endure. Hence, building a city and making a name are only means to perpetuate a single culture." There is no indication in the text that anything sinister is

planned by the people, and because no motivation is mentioned, the act of the Gods (yes, it's plural here), the act of the Gods doesn't seem to be punishment.

Instead we saw the Gods mix up the languages, and this story gives a mythical narrative for why we have diverse languages. Now here's the key takeaway we need to remember today in the words of Ralph Kline: "cultural diversity is the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment in it. In this story the people desire uniformity, and God desires diversity."¹ With this understanding one scholar says that this story can be seen as "a series of gifts received differently by different groups of people. To affluent and competitive people and congregations, God's invitation is to slow the feverish pace of life and to rest in assurance of God's love that is given, not earned. To poor, marginalized people and congregations, God's promise is that our ultimate value does not depend on our building gleaming cities and towers of achievement but upon God's dazzling and soaring love."² So when we hear this story paired together with our reading from Pentecost in Acts we remember this purpose of language.

Again in Acts we see that diversity is not something that terrifies the author, but rather the witnesses are "bewildered," then "amazed and astonished." In that moment everyone heard and understood what was going on in their own language. On Pentecost God's purpose breaks into the world again, and we see that God brings humanity together

¹ Aymer, Margaret P. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16). "Day of Pentecost, Acts 2:1-21: Exegetical Perspective"* p15-19.

² Sheffield, Richard L. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16). "Day of Pentecost, Acts 2:1-21: Homiletical Perspective"* p15-19.

in understanding through their differences, not in spite of. The diversity of languages, cultures, and people will become a welcomed challenge for the early Christians. The preachers will need to change their stories to fit the context, the teachers will need to employ different images, and throughout the ages what is emphasized to communicate God's message will change. We get that. Even in the ways congregations use names for God can show the diversity. Some will connect with "high priest," others with "the good shepherd," others with "the alpha and the omega," and still some "almighty father." Each of these names gets us into a mindset of thinking about God, but they do so with different approaches.

In the business world sales associates know how to do this well. They find something to connect with the customer on, they use the customer's language, and they make the connections to the product. The sales approach to a twenty-year-old female will not be the same as a seventy-year-old man.

Here in Acts we get a glimpse of our God who proclaims that God's message is for all people, and that it *will* take on different modes of communication. Because God intentionally created a diverse world, this diversity in approach for congregations and for sharing the gospel is a good thing!

Yet, not everyone in Acts was convinced that it *was* a good thing. Some, in their amazement, were ready to attribute the ecstasy to God, while others simply thought the disciples and other visitor were drunk. So too our world doesn't always appreciate diversity in language and culture. As Michael Jenkins says, it become terrifyingly real when

“genocide, under the euphemism of ethnic cleansing, lurks under the mantle of religious and tribal purity; fanatic nationalism, under the misnomer of patriotism, lures even the most settled souls and devoted spirits of fellow citizen. And so people fear difference, otherness, the strangeness of the stranger. But the real threat...lies not in the difference God has woven into all parts of God’s creation, including humanity. The great danger...lies in any group’s lust to power over others, its insistence that its identity alone reflects God’s nature and God’s way, its demand that the otherness of others be erased from the pages of history or from the face of the earth.”

Yet, the good news found today in Acts is that the image of God is not something that adheres to the singular individual. Instead, the image of God is one that is a “Holy Family” – found in the creator, redeemer, and sustainer. In the image of God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit there is an eternal and living community, differentiated in person, united in love. “We are ourselves created for this community, and never fully live in God’s image until we live in communion. Communion assumes difference – not uniformity, not conformity to a single idealized form of life, or nationality, or ethnicity, or tribe.”

It is with this vision of a world and a church that we gather to celebrate this day. On this Pentecost Sunday we look to be reminded of the beauty in diversity. We see our differences as opportunities and not barriers. We go out of our way to appreciate the other, to rejoice in our differences, to reject colorblindness, and to uphold love. Friends, today we gather at this table, to commune, to be gathered in our difference, to become

enflamed with love, and finally, we become a gathered community where only strangers stood a short time before. Friends, come commune in your difference in this holy place. Amen.