

Day of Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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The scene was odd. The disciples were gathered, flames began dancing on their heads, and then, they begin speaking in non-native languages. After these disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began communicating with devout Jews who were “living” in Jerusalem.

And, the Greek word translated here as “living” has a specific meaning “to have settled or be planted in a new place.” That is, these Jewish people weren’t born in Jerusalem, and they probably looked, acted, and engaged in different ways. Maybe they chose to move to Jerusalem to try out a new city. Perhaps they moved for a job promotion. They could have been migrant workers looking to support their families, or part of a process of “chain migration,” or, even, refugees fleeing violence. In the end, we don’t know who or what brought them to Jerusalem nor do we know their legal status. But, what we do know is that, after having been filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples were driven to cultivate, from the very beginning, a multi-lingual, multi-national, and multi-ethnic movement based on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, somewhere between that Pentecost in Acts and, say, Constantine, the Crusades, Colonialism, the Civil War, or your commute to church today, that diverse movement was diluted. For, although all Christians share those multi-lingual beginnings found in Acts, a contemporary study found that only 7.5% of Christian congregations in the United States are multiracial and multicultural. And, they defined “multiracial and

multicultural” as a congregation where no one racial or ethnic group makes up more than 80% of its members.¹ So, another way to put this is that 92.5% of congregations in the United States are made up of a single ethnic group comprising more than 80% of its membership. And, to make matters worse, a recent study shows that our denomination, that is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is the whitest denomination in the United States.²

So, it’s clear that the apple has fallen, O, so far from the tree of Pentecost. We’ve taken God’s movement centered in diversity and embraced segregation. We’ve idolized homogeneity in our artwork, our hymnody, our preaching, and our structures. We’ve turned an ideology of inclusion into guiding principles that indicate you’re welcome only if you look like us, if you never ever challenge us, if you don’t work to change or offend us, and, as one theologian puts it, if you “work heroically to fit in with our communal sense of self.” If you can play by those rules, then we welcome you as you are. You see, we’ve traded the challenge of the Holy Spirit for illusory comfort, we’ve let the Holy Spirit move in our self-imposed and constrained ways, and we’ve almost entirely forgotten that the church, from the beginning, rejected assimilation and embraced diversity in all its forms.

And, to embody that divine diversity we first need to recognize what it’s like for *our* difference to be embraced. We need to understand what it’s like to be included and welcomed. It’s that comfort when you hear your native language after having been living among new ones. It’s the familiarity that comes with talking cultural “lingo” or generational phraseology that opens your mind to a deeper meaning. It’s the easy

¹<https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/22E434957A95E21E2540EF23F30FEDED/B5DB36482C97230E6A4D01E12DB8921D>

²<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>

environments when you don't have to interpret what someone is trying to communicate. It's the places where you can bring your full self with your own clothing, speech pattern, hairstyle, and volume. For, the diversity that the Holy Spirit pours down at Pentecost reaches you and me through different people and situations. The Holy Spirit meets us, speaking our language, and that is a beautiful gift.

As we come to this font, to this table, and to this space we reject the illusion of separateness and to realize our deep interconnection. We gather here on this Pentecost Sunday to give thanks for the varied gifts of the Holy Spirit. We come to welcome the diversity of language and culture in our church. And we gather each week to explore how we might partner with the Holy Spirit as she welcomes, includes, and embraces all people in the unity of love.

So, today, the Holy Spirit reminds us that what makes us strong, that what makes us people of faith, and that what makes us the church is our never-ceasing commitment to a rich, wonderful, and authentic diversity shaped in love. So, we give thanks for a God who constantly widens the circle. A God whose love is wide enough to include you and me, and a God who gives us an opportunity to expand that circle in love so that we all might experience God's resurrection. Amen.