

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's reading from Acts is odd. We heard that the disciples were gathered, and flames began dancing on their heads. Then, they begin speaking in non-native languages so that they could communicate with every devout Jewish person who was "living" in Jerusalem. And, I want direct our attention to the Greek word translated here as "living." It has a specific meaning. It means "to have settled or been planted in a new place." That is, these Jewish people were not born in Jerusalem, they didn't speak the native language, 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 the 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. What we do know is that, after having been filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples were compelled to cultivate a multi-lingual, multi-national, and multi-ethnic movement based on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Because of this beginning, sometimes people like to call Pentecost the birthday of the church. While it's a nice thing to imagine and an easy children's message, I don't think it was the birth of the church. It's important to remember that Acts was likely written by the same author as the gospel of Luke. But, did we hear from the gospel of Luke today? No. It was John. So we have two different perspectives on the Holy Spirit. In John's gospel we were told that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit to be an advocate, and six

chapters later in John 20, Jesus was the one who showed the disciples his wounds, breathed on the disciples, and said, “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In John, Jesus gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit on some random day before he left them, while in Luke writing the book of Acts saw the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples on Pentecost. For Luke, that one Pentecost that had the tongues of fire and multi-lingual disciples took place on the Jewish festival known as.... Pentecost. That’s right, our Jewish siblings of faith had Pentecost long before that day described in Acts. Pentecost in Judaism, is also known a Shavuot or the Feast of Weeks, was originally an agricultural festival that began the time for harvesting wheat. By the time John and Luke were writing, it had also become known as the anniversary of the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai. That is, the moment that Moses received the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Ok, come back to me. Why does all this matter? Well, it’s important that we see how closely tied together our Christian faith is with the Jewish faith. It’s also important that we recognize that Pentecost with flame and foreign speech was not something novel or unique. In fact, the spirit of God had been revealed to the Israelites for generations through the Torah and in the words of the prophets. Then, Jesus gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples. In today’s reading from Acts, this Spirit was given to Jewish-born people from all over who spoke different languages and had unique customs. And if we kept reading, we’ll discover that in Acts 10 non-Jewish-born people receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. You see, what we know to be true about Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit has long been in the business of building a longer, wider, and more expansive table. At every meal, our God is including more

people, expanding the welcome, and proclaiming that the gift of God's spirit of love, grace, peace, and compassion are for all people.

And, the fact is that God's radical inclusion is beyond our imagination. Peter, in today's reading from Acts, named the prophet Joel who preached that this outpouring of the Holy Spirit is beyond what we could vision. Joel gave the image of the sun being darkened and the moon turning to blood. And, if I stop and really think about it—it's surreal. What would our lives be like if the sun was darkened? Would we even be alive? What would we experience if blood was in the night sky?

And that's the thing. Being expansive is surreal. Widening the table to include everyone challenges our cultural norms that tell us to do the most for the middle and move on. But our God is an irrational deity. Jesus rejected the principle of maximizing utility only for those in the center. You see, the Holy Spirit doesn't care for your borders and bylaws. The Holy Spirit doesn't care about political pandering and power over the other. The Holy Spirit says your gender binary and limiting labels mean nothing in God's reigndom. For, Jesus' ministry showed us that those on the margins, the outside, and in the borderlands, these are God's focus. In the end, limitless inclusion and expansive love are the Holy Spirit's only goals.

And that feels a little uncomfortable to those of us in the center. It is uncomfortable for those who are white, or male, or an American citizen, or living without a disability, or straight, or employed, or middle class, or housed, or one of the many other culturally normative assumptions we live with every day. It is also challenging for those who live in the center to imagine how the

table we sit at can be expanded, or where the table gets that extra leaf put in. It feels surreal to imagine a world without borders or rulers. It feels uncomfortable to imagine a world without power or privilege. It feels bizarre to imagine a world with only love and peace. Yet, in the mist of this discomfort, it feels like something new, something changing, something foreign.

But what Pentecost reminds us is that this is nothing new. From the Torah to that fiery Pentecost, and into today we have a God that never ceases to challenge us to expand the circle. While it might be a radical idea in our culture, God's reign is a surreal place that even Salvador Dali could not fully imagine.

So there it is. That's the point of Pentecost – to remind us of God's radical invitation to join the Holy Spirit in making the table bigger for all people. As we go forth this day, we are invited to expand the table to all our LGBTQIA+ siblings during this Pride Month. We are invited to expand the table so that those living with disability might join us in this space. We are encouraged to rejoice (and eat ice cream) in the ways the Holy Spirit has already worked through the Supreme Court to legalize interracial marriage 58 years ago this week on Loving Day. So, together, let us ever so slightly move our little corner of the earth toward God's surrealist reality that the table big enough, wide enough, and expansive enough for all. Amen.