

May 31, 2020
Year A
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
Acts 2:1-21

The Day of Pentecost
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Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

On Fire

“Pastor, the youth group needs your help.” That’s what the youth leader at the church that I was working at said.

“Of course,” I answered, “What do they need.”

“Well,” he said, “the seniors in the group are planning the youth retreat and they want the theme to be individuality and they want you to give them scripture verses to go along with that theme.”

“Oh.” I said. “Well, interestingly enough, individuality isn’t really a big theme in the Bible, but I’ll see what I can do.”

As you might know, the Bible is not really about and not really addressed to individuals. The Bible, is the work of multiple authors, who lived and wrote over a period of about a thousand years. The Bible is the product of a community of faith that spans centuries and its words are almost always addressed to a community as well.

Here’s what it means to believe in God. Here’s what it means to say that God is in your midst. Here’s what it looks like to love your neighbor. Here’s what it looks like to worship faithfully. Those are the kinds of questions that the words of the Bible answer, but it expects that the people who are asking those questions and who are trying to live out the answers are doing it within a community of faith.

People who say that the Bible contradicts itself are absolutely right. That’s one of the wonderful things about it. In its pages we get to see how the community of the faithful grappled with hard questions and came to know God in new ways over time. And we get to see them disagree about how to be faithful. And we get to see them encounter God in new ways, when the old answers that they had relied

on failed them in the face of some new crisis in their communal lives. In the diversity of its stories, of its laws, of its theological reflections we see the constancy of God's grace being revealed over time.

One of the things that is consistent throughout all of scripture, though, is that it addresses people who are placed into a community, whether that community is a family, a tribe, a confederation, a nation, an exiled community, a group of disciples, or a congregation.

So, individuality isn't really a big topic in the bible. But I gave it a try. And the best that I could come up with was 1 Corinthians 12, which is the source of our first reading for today, because it focuses on the individual giftedness of every member of the community: "To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit," it says.

And then it goes on to give some examples of how the Spirit's gifts can be manifested in individuals:

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues." (1 Corinthians 12:8-10)

But, here's the thing. It says that those gifts are given "for the common good," for the well-being of the community. And then it goes on to talk about how those who believe in Jesus are all one body. "For just as the body is one and had many members, and all the members of the body through many are one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Corinthians 12:12)

And it goes on to celebrate the gifts that each member or part of the body brings to the body:

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?...If all were a single member, where would the body be? (1 Corinthians 12:14-17, 19)

Later, it also goes on to say more about the interdependence of the members of this body. It says, "...that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1 Corinthians 12:25-26)

I gave the reading about gifts to the seniors in the youth group and told them basically what I told you, that our individuality has been given to us, not just for us, but so that the whole community would be built up. I told them to run with that. And they did.

Now, I'm going to completely change the subject. Because today is Pentecost. And I just realized something about Pentecost this year that I have to share with you. But I'll have to do it with a lot of embarrassment, because it's so screamingly obvious that it's embarrassing that I just noticed it this year.

20 years ago, I went to a continuing education event that hosted a speaker named Marva Dawn. She gave a very inspiring talk which has stayed with me throughout my whole career. But one of the other things that she did was teach me how to say the names of the nations listed in today's Acts reading.

Now, I'm not saying that she taught me the only possible pronunciations of these nations and regions, but she taught me a valid one. She did it by singing them, singing us a sung setting of the Acts 2 reading that she sang as a part of her college choir. After hearing her sing it a couple of times, I found that names that might once have stopped me like a deer in headlights if I had ever been so unfortunate as to have been scheduled to be a lector on Pentecost, were firmly stuck in my head.

I could roll through them as if they were nothing. No big deal at all.

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 (Acts 2:9-11a)

The problem was, that that was exactly what I started to do. I started to run through them as if they were nothing, just a clever pronunciation trick. I was so pleased with myself that I could say them I stopped thinking about what they meant. I missed the forest for the trees.

But this year, I started thinking about them. Who were these people, these devout Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem when the day of Pentecost had come?

Finally, after 20 years, I looked them up. And I discovered that some of the people listed here came from nations that were historic enemies of the Jews. Parthia was a contemporary empire that was a threat to Rome, and many people in the Roman empire lived in terror of the Parthian army, mounted on their white horses. I discovered that they were, without a doubt a racially diverse group. Some of them had gentile roots, they or their ancestors having converted from paganism.

What this tells us is that on the day that the church was born through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit created a church that was beautiful, diverse and challenging.

It demanded that people, especially the people who might have felt like it was **their** church, put away their fears, their historical animosity, their prejudices, and their perceived privileges to claim as sisters and brothers people looked different than they did, who spoke different languages than they did, and who came from places that might have historically or currently been their enemies.

They were all Jewish, but this one thing that was the same about them does not mean that there would not have been tensions between them and the Jews from Judea, because of their differences.

Still, this was the church that God wanted to be born on Pentecost.

I've been told, by some of our youth, by some of our other church members, and by a well-known preaching professor that the phrase "we're all in this together" has just been done to death during this Coronavirus crisis.

And they are right, that we're not all having the same experience of this shut down and pandemic. There are huge gaps in the experience of rich, middle class, and poor, huge gaps in the lockdown experience of people who are homeless and people who are housed. There are huge gaps in the experience of people who live alone verses people who have been locked down with their families. There are huge gaps in the experience of those who are retired verses people who are trying to work through this pandemic and both of their experience is different from the experience of people who have lost their jobs. There are huge gaps in the experience of being locked down in a city verses being locked down in the suburbs or in a rural area. Being locked down with infants or toddlers is very different from being locked down with older children or teenagers. People who struggle with depression or anxiety or some other kind of mental illness are having a very different experience of this lock down than people who don't. People with underlying health issues have a whole different set of worries about being locked down and about opening back up, than people who would define themselves as healthy.

There is a lot that has been different about our experience of this Coronavirus lockdown.

But it's not just in terms of the Coronavirus situation where the words, "We're all in this together," might sound pretty hollow.

Recent atrocities in our country committed against people of color, have reminded those who might be able to forget, people who do not have to live with this as their daily reality, that people of color do not experience the same America that white people experience, that the historical and present realities of this country would tell people of color that we are, in fact, not all in this together.

Like you, I have watched in horror as people's lives have been devoured by the flames of the obscene sacrificial fire of individual and institutional racism.

Like you, I have watched in something near despair as fire has descended on cities, and as the narrative of peaceful protests, people demanding legitimate change to systems and attitudes that are killing them, killing their fathers, brothers, sons, killing their mothers, sisters, daughters, have been lost in the fires of people who want chaos and violence, by people who want to coopt the narrative of change, the narrative of justice, with their own message, that nothing can change, that peace with justice is not possible, that destruction and hatred are the only way.

But still, today the fires of Pentecost come. And still, every day, the Holy Spirit is active in the world and in the church.

And still, it is true, whether we live like it's true or not, still it is true that we are interdependent, in the church, in the world, as human beings, as an entire ecosystem.

And it is true, that when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

And it is still true that on Pentecost, the Spirit created the church as the Spirit wanted it to be, made up of people from every nation and every race under heaven.

On Pentecost the church was born and became a diverse baptized, anointed, and gifted community.

After Pentecost the church could no longer be a small, cozy, gathering of friends from the same part of the Galilee. They could no longer be comfortable with each other because they all came from the same place, spoke the same language, had the same background, shared the same cultural associations.

All of a sudden on Pentecost the church became infinitely more complex and infinitely more beautiful.

There are so many things that I don't know right now. There are so many questions I have for which I have no answers. There are so many ways in which I grieve and so many ways in which I wonder how we're going to survive this, this racism, this hatred that infects our nation.

There are so many reasons to be worried, heartsick, afraid.

But, while there are so many things that I don't know, here's something that I do know. I know that the same Spirit who was poured out on the church at Pentecost is still active in the world and in our church and in our lives.

So, I'm going to start there, with the beautiful, God ordained diversity of the Pentecost church, where people were not miraculously made the same, but where people were miraculously chosen.

And I'm going to start with the reality that when one part of the body suffers the whole body suffers.

Certainly, my calling for such a time as this is not despair. My calling is to keep in front of me the vision of the church God called together at Pentecost, creating, not uniformity, but unity.

And my calling, and perhaps all of our callings is to listen to people whose experience is different than ours and to learn from them. Then in response to what we hear, to use whatever we have, our gifts, our abilities, our resources, our voice,

and our willingness to give up the stage so that others can speak, for the common good.

Today we celebrate a new beginning, a fresh start. Today we celebrate the Spirit, who moves and creates out of nothing. Today we celebrate the Spirit, the breath of God who can raise dead, dry bones and give them life and breath. Today we celebrate the Spirit who transforms communities and who brings life out of death.

Today I celebrate with tears of grief in my eyes, but also with hope that the Spirit still moves and transforms and can give life. So, today, through tears, I hope that even when I can't imagine how we're going to survive this, the Holy Spirit can bring to our church, to our world, to our nation transforming grace and healing fire. Amen.