

May 23, 2021
The Day of Pentecost
Year B
Acts 2:1-21
Confirmation Day
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

One Body

When the day of Pentecost had come, they, the apostles, were all together in one place (Acts 2:1).

Well, lucky them.

Being together in one place. That's a luxury our Confirmands, Kayleigh, Alan, Joey, Isabelle, and Pat, have had very little of during the two years of their Confirmation experience.

They started Confirmation in September of 2019, meeting in the Founders' Room at Emmanuel. The first five months of their Confirmation class went very much like it has other years. We were studying the Bible. We were meeting our ancestors in faith, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, even Hagar and Ishmael. We went to the bathrooms at Bethel. If you're curious about what that means, ask a Confirmation student. We learned about Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Sarah, Joseph and his brothers. We went to Calumet where we heard about Pharoah and the plagues. We spent time with Moses and Aaron and Miriam, and the Israelites, wandering in the desert. We learned about King David and campaigned for and against him.

Then it was Lent. Soup suppers and the Lenten Evening Prayer services began on March 4th. The confirmation class showed up and listened to me share a story about an experience of God that I had in a moment of crisis in my life. The next week, March 11th they showed up again, but, besides the Confirmands, there were far fewer people there to hear another person share her faith story. Word had gotten out that the virus that was ravaging the Wuhan province of China might have come to the United States, so some

people were staying a little bit closer to home than usual. No one knew quite what to think.

And then it was March 12th. The day that the decision was made not to have in person worship at Emmanuel for what we thought would be a few weeks, while the country and the world got this Coronavirus thing under control.

Everything was up in the air, for everything. Every aspect of church life, every aspect of school for the Confirmation students, everyone's job, if they were lucky enough to still have one, everything the kids liked to do, music, sports, and scouts, everything that filled up their lives and brought them joy, was in complete disarray. I don't need to say much more. I'm sure you remember how those early days of the pandemic felt. I'm sure you remember the fear, the unknown, the silence, the sense that life as we knew it, as we had known it, had come to an end.

They were all together in one place. Those first apostles, those who had run away from Jesus in fear when he was arrested, and the women who had followed him to the cross and the grave and who had been the first to learn about the resurrection; the first to share the news that the stone was rolled away, that the tomb was empty, that Jesus was alive, that Christ was risen! Those first apostles, who had witnessed the resurrected Jesus' days among them, and who had been there for his Ascension. They were all together in one place.

The book of Acts tells us that in those days, the days after Jesus' ascension, the apostles and the women who followed Jesus and Mary, Jesus' mother, and his brothers, were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. They had seen miracles, they knew that, but I wonder what they felt like in the in between time, in the time between Jesus' Ascension and the Pentecost coming of the Holy Spirit. After all, they didn't know what was coming. They couldn't predict how long it would take. They had a promise, they had the memory of miracles, they had each other, and that was it.

What was their waiting time like? Did it feel like the silence of a world holding its breath? Did it feel like the calm before a storm? Did it carry with a thrill of hope, of expectation, or of terror? Or, perhaps all three?

In some ways, they had it better than we did. They had it better than our Confirmands did. They could not be all together in one place; for months, almost for more than a year. The Confirmation class, like the rest of Emmanuel, moved to Zoom, but honestly, I couldn't imagine trying to do Confirmation curriculum over Zoom in those early days, weeks, and even months of the pandemic. I didn't think that what any of us needed was to learn more about God as though God was a theory, a subject to be studied. We needed to be in each other's presence, as together in one place as we could be, and we needed to do what Christians have done since those first apostles, in times of waiting, in times of confusion, in times of fear; in those breath holding times. We needed to support each other, we needed to share our stories of life in those uncertain times, and we needed to be in the presence of the Lord. We needed to pray. So that is what we did. In a time that felt a bit like the times described in Peter's sermon in our reading from Acts for today, we prayed.

In his sermon, Peter quotes the prophet Joel, who speaks for God saying:

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' ”

(Acts 2:19-21).

Peter foretells, in his Pentecost sermon, the end of the world as we know it, disruptions in the heavens and on the earth, blood, and fire, and smoke. And it felt like that was what we were living through. So, we did what Peter say we should do, for hope and salvation, in a time when the earth was shaken. We called upon the name of the Lord.

The Confirmation class, for years, has had something called the “Top 5”. Five things we pray about every time we get together. It started out as one thing that we prayed for every week, and then it expanded, based on the ongoing concerns of the students in the class.

At the beginning of this group of Confirmands’ Confirmation experience the “Top 5” were:

People who have no one to pray for them
Absent friends (unless no one was absent that week)
Minority Groups
People with Depression and Anxiety
and the Environment.

In March 2020, this group of Confirmands and last year’s Confirmands, who were still in class with them, added what they called, “Coronavirus Everything”, meaning all of the ways that Covid-19 was affecting our lives. It was a prayer:

for people who were sick,
for people who were struggling in lockdown,
for people who had lost loved ones to Covid-19,
for overwhelmed medical personnel,
for people who were making public health decisions,

for students, teachers, and administrators and school staff, who were learning to do education in a completely new way on the fly,
for people who had lost jobs,
and for people whose jobs had become overwhelming in the pandemic.

It was a prayer for everything and everyone that was in any way affected by Covid-19, which means, essentially it was a prayer for everything and everyone.

We added “Coronavirus Everything” to the Top 5 and then we also prayed for our own prayers every time we met, things going on in our own lives and things we were concerned about for friends, teachers, classmates, family members.

We met every other week during those early months of the pandemic, just to check in on each other, to support each other, and to pray together. We met in March, April, May, and then it was Pentecost. The day that would have been Confirmation Day for our two second year students. It would have been the time for Confirmation classes to end for the summer. I asked the kids what they wanted to do, in that time when we were all still so isolated, still so locked down. Were they ready for a break or did they want to continue to meet over the summer, as a touchstone, a time, even though it was on a screen, to see other faces, to hear other voices, to know that we were not alone? The kids decided to keep meeting, to keep supporting each other, to keep praying. So just about every other week during the summer, we met, and talked and prayed.

Things got a little more “normal” in the fall. We went back to meeting every week. We were joined by two new Confirmation students. We started doing curriculum again. But we were still on Zoom, for the most part.

I love teaching Confirmation. It’s been one of the most joy filled things about my work here at Emmanuel. I consider it a gift to be able to spend time with the young people of this congregation every week, sharing and exploring our faith with them and learning about them and their lives. I am grateful for the community that I get to share with the Confirmation students and for the treasures of faith that I get to share with them.

But this was a hard year. Hard because so many of the things that I love to do with the Confirmation class I didn't get to do this year.

We all have our lists of things we missed this year and some of my favorite Confirmation activities are definitely on that list. No lock ins, no trip to Calumet for Confirmation camp, no Jailbreak. I adapted my Confirmation curriculum for Zoom as well as I could, but I admit there were moments this year when I really struggled with our enforced distance for Confirmation class. I grieved. I lamented. I wondered if this experience could possibly be meaningful to them, could possibly be creating the sense of community with God and with each other, that is one of the treasured parts of Confirmation for me.

It is good to be able to be together in one place. At the end of April, we started having in person Confirmation classes again. We masked and tried to stay socially distanced, sometimes meeting outside, sometimes meeting inside in big rooms, with open windows. It was wonderful to be back together in person and to be able to do some of the more active things that make up part of the Confirmation curriculum. Someday, ask Alan and Isabelle and Hannah and Julianna about the new game Treek. It's something that just about anyone can play, but that few people can master. One hint, pick a big tree.

But I've learned something over the past few weeks, in the final run up to Confirmation, as I've talked with the Confirmands in classes and in one-on-one meetings, as I've read the prayers written by the first-year students for the Confirmands. I've found that while it is a blessing and a gift to be able to be together in one place, something that I will never take for granted again, the Holy Spirit can move in our lives even when we can't be together in one place. And the Holy Spirit can create community even over social distance, even over Zoom.

Every year I'm so amazed by and so grateful for the way the kids in our Confirmation class turn into a community; how they learn to care for each other, how

they learn to know each other's' needs and concerns. How they ask about things going on in each other's lives. These kids who come from different towns, go to different schools, who have very different interests and personalities, become one body by the work of the Spirit in their lives.

This year, I wondered, could that have happened? And I found out that it had.

As I do every year, I asked the Confirmands what the best parts of their Confirmation experience were. Some of them talked about coming to know the Bible better being something that they really appreciated. But all of them talked about how much they enjoyed meeting new people in Confirmation and growing close to them. They talked about how important Confirmation was to them, especially this year during the pandemic, when it gave them something to look forward to, a chance to be with other people, and to share their stories. It was one thing that wasn't cancelled. It was a chance for them to remember that they weren't alone. It was a chance for them to support each other and to do something for others, to give what they had, their prayers for the wellbeing of the world.

The beautiful community that Confirmation classes in the past here at Emmanuel have experienced was not missing for this group, in spite of my worries and my sorrow about what could not happen for these kids. Still the Spirit moved. The Spirit who we celebrate today, knit this group together in one spirit, even when they couldn't be together in one place. Because God does not abandon God's people. God is with us, no matter where we are, no matter what we're going through.

The Spirit, who communicated God's love, God's promise, hope and new life, on Pentecost, with those gathered in Jerusalem in a way no one ever expected, giving people of different nations and races and languages a way to hear the good news of God, a way to hear about God's deeds of power, came to us, came to our Confirmands, during this, our time of struggle, our time of trial. And together, we have heard, together we have shared, together we have experienced good news. Death is not the end of the story. There

is hope and salvation in Jesus. We have been brought together, by the Spirit, into one community, one body, and we can count on God, even when it feels like everything is falling apart. God will be with us. Because even when we can't all be together in one place, the Holy Spirit comes. We are not alone. Amen.