

Pentecost B 2021 Acts 2:1-21

I spent the January term of my first year of seminary in Geneva, Switzerland, taking a class on ecumenism and the global church. We met in the building that houses the headquarters for both the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, which is mostly offices and conference rooms but also features a large, modern chapel where people gather daily for worship. Because the center draws staff and visitors from all over the world, their custom is to end each morning worship service with the Lord's Prayer, inviting everyone to pray together but in their own language. Some of my classmates thought it was incredibly moving to pray this common prayer and hear it echoed back in so many languages at once—a beautiful unity in diversity. I couldn't stand it. To me it sounded like a chaotic mess. It was probably the closest I will ever get to what the first apostles heard on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit gave them the ability to speak in the native language of each of the pilgrims who were gathered in Jerusalem, but I didn't like trying to speak something I thought I knew and not being able to hear myself think. It's been a dozen years since that trip, and now I think that part of the point of that holy chaos was not being able to hear *myself* think.

Pentecost is sometimes called the “birthday” of the church, but this is not exactly true. Lutherans define the church as the congregation of saints in which the Word is taught and the sacraments are celebrated. So we could say that the apostles, having taken part in the last supper with Jesus who was the Word, had already been formed into the church. Pentecost is when they get their birthday gift—the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet that gift is not for their own benefit; it's for them to use on behalf of others.

Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival that also commemorated God giving the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was one of the times during the year when the people would travel to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. Acts records the long list of nationalities represented on the day of Pentecost, communities from all over the known world. The Spirit gives the apostles the ability to witness to these people about what God had done through Jesus, but even though the apostles are all Galileans, they are able to communicate with the pilgrims in their own languages so they all understand. At first, not all of them are convinced, but if we were to read to the end of the chapter, we would find that 3,000 of those who heard the apostles' message that day were baptized.

This makes Pentecost seem like a celebration of the people who are ‘out there’ coming into the Church, but it's really the opposite. The Spirit drives the apostles out to the crowd.

When the pilgrims leave Jerusalem and return to their homes, they will take the apostles' teaching and the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension with them, spreading the message of this local event to the entire world. The point of Pentecost and theme of Acts is not to round up everyone and confine them to a single location or congregation; the movement of the church in Acts and the work of the Pentecost Spirit is always directed outward, going anywhere and everywhere, especially to the people and places the apostles least expect.

That is the holy chaos of the church. The Spirit of God acts in, with, through, and for people in all places, under all sorts of circumstances. The Spirit wasn't working to make the Medes and Parthians and Cretans and Arabs all like the Galileans; the Spirit spoke *in the native language of each*, to meet them where they were. It's the Spirit of God which unites the church: not nationality, not race, not language, not custom. We are supposed to be a diverse community which is inclusive of all sorts of people; the Spirit spoke to those who would repeat the message to everyone, to the very ends of the earth, just to make sure.

When we live into the Spirit of Pentecost, we don't strive for assimilation as our end goal—let new people come to us so they can think, speak, and act like us; quite the opposite. We welcome the story of how God has worked in those who bring different perspectives; we make space not just to talk but to listen; we look forward to learning something new. We don't just try to hear ourselves think. It's not easy, being students and as well as teachers, guests as well as hosts, listeners as well as talkers. The diversity of community into which the Spirit calls us can be hard work; the cacophony sounds foreign to our ears. But in the still, quiet center of this holy chaos is the Spirit of the one God of all.

We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and like the first apostles, this gift is not for our own edification but to empower us for loving others. We have been baptized and called to share the love of God from here to the entire world. But sharing doesn't only go in one direction. God has called others to share with us, to speak to us, to teach, challenge, gift, and encourage us. Would it be easier, would it be simpler, would it be more comfortable if everyone just spoke the same language? I suppose it would. But it wouldn't be a true reflection of the God who is so much bigger, who goes so much farther, who loves so much deeper than what we can see. May the Spirit of God, who like wind and fire cannot be contained or tamed, draw us out of ourselves and into the chaos, and may we recognize that that chaos is truly holy.