

*Pentecost:*  
*A Diversity of Gifts*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. <sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

There is a lot that is strange about this story of Pentecost. One of the strange things, I think, is this long list of who was there, and the reason I think it odd is that it seems uncharacteristic of the writer Luke. Of all the gospel writers Luke is the master storyteller – handing down wonderful narratives filled with rich visual images, human pathos and divine intervention – all spun together with eloquent prose.

Luke tells the three Lost and Found parables, including the Prodigal Son, and takes us walking down that road to Emmaus on Easter. And yet, here the story teller begins his sequel to the gospel, with this long, hard-to-pronounce list that sounds more like a geography lesson. Here Luke gives the most attention not to narrative intrigue, but to this list of nationalities: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Asians, Romans, Arabs, Egyptians, Cretans and so on. It reads like an appendix, the sort of thing most writers would put in a footnote.

If we were to do a content analysis of this chapter, Luke devotes a full one-third of the space to recalling the nations of people who were gathered. When the extraordinary phenomenon of speaking in tongues and the amazing understanding of foreign languages takes place, we are told that even those who were there wondered: what does this all mean? This is what Luke does not want us to miss. The very first experience of the church, the organizing moment of this grand adventure began as an experience of diversity! With representatives of every conceivable ethnic and geographic and national origin imaginable. Not only that, the list includes two nations who, in the first century, were already extinct. They had ceased to be a people on the face of the earth. Those who were gathered at Pentecost, by the winds of the Holy Spirit, were a blest communion, a fellowship divine to be sure.

The church was born in the most diverse fabric of people that could possibly be assembled; from the ends of the earth, including the living and the dead. We are called to pay attention to this diversity, because sometimes we think international struggles and racial diversity are a modern concern – arising over the course of more recent history:

like the racial tensions we have inherited from American slavery and the animosity some have toward immigrants.

We like to believe that our current consciousness was raised yesterday about including folks of all sorts in our community – black, white, gay, straight, conservative, liberal, American born and immigrant... That our Christian calling today says there's room for all – we like to think with our enlightened minds. In fact, human diversity is an issue the church has wrestled with – and not always successfully – throughout its more than two thousand year history.

The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost binds all sorts of diverse people together. The Spirit of God consecrates those differences and creates unity out of that rich diversity. So that from its inception, the key question which has confronted the church has not been the correctness of its theology, what we believe about this or about that, but rather the simple, difficult, exasperating question of whether the church will be strong enough, and faithful enough, and spirit-filled enough, to transcend the boundaries of human existence, boundaries of nation, and race, and ethnicity, and gender, and geography, and history. This diversity is the gift of God's spirit which gives birth to the church.

After World War Two, theologian Karl Barth reminded us not to get all dreamy eyed and romantic when we confess in the Apostles Creed: "I believe in the holy catholic church." "We do not believe in the church," insisted Barth, not in the same way that we believe in God. What we believe is "that in this congregation the work of the Holy Spirit becomes an event."<sup>1</sup>

The work of the Holy Spirit becomes an event. Today's spirit-filled event is the reception of this year's Confirmation Class. We honor the good work they did this year in their Confirmation process to make a bold commitment to become full members of our congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, ChristianityToday.com.

Receiving them into the membership of our church is – I believe – evidence of how the Holy Spirit becomes an event. They bring their own unique gifts and personalities, their interests and commitments to the mission of the church, as well as their doubts and their willingness to follow their questions into deepened understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In a college commencement address, David Brooks said something that ties together today’s twin celebrations of Pentecost and Confirmation. He noted how most young people are looking for something deeper than what our culture dishes up as an obsession of self-fulfillment. He said, “Most young people I know do not look inside themselves and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life. They are called by something beyond themselves and their self is constructed gradually by their calling.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends at Bryn Mawr, the young people I have gotten to know in this congregation also want to live into a calling that embraces all manner of diversity. They know the tensions of our culture that pit people against each other – amid political divisions, racial divisions and international animosities. They find themselves seeking a world that is more accepting, more tolerant, and more welcoming. What they love about this church is our work for serving others, and sharing what we have to improve the lives of others across race and socio-economic divisions – by tutoring, feeding and engaging in mission.

That’s how the early church began, and by the leadership of the young people joining our church, I hope that our community of faith will also become even more accepting of human diversity, more tolerant and more welcoming than we already are.

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<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, commencement address, BYU, 2009.

One of my friends in ministry moved from an urban, downtown church some years ago to a much smaller community in East Tennessee. After she'd been there a while, she said a sort of culture shock settled in and she wondered if she'd made the right decision to move. In this period of uncertainty and confusion she had a visitor stop by the church, a mother newly arrived from another town. "How's it going?" the pastor asked the newcomer, thinking about the difficulty of her own move. The church has made all the difference, the woman replied. My children cannot wait for church school. They are so at home here at church and that's made our transition a lot easier."

The pastor reflected on this interchange in light of Pentecost saying: "My guess is that a new family can hear love and acceptance in the church and countless, diverse expressions of it. For by the grace of God, the church exists to proclaim: no matter where you live or what your accent is, or what work you do, the gift we mainly have to offer each other is the language of love in so many accents and so many dialects. What a gift," she concluded, "the language of love known to us best in Jesus Christ, and now spoken all over the world in all the languages of the heart."<sup>3</sup>

My friends, that is the good news of Pentecost. Today that good news becomes an event of the Holy Spirit as we welcome twenty-three new members into our congregation. They will lead us to show forth for the world that the church of Jesus Christ does not find its diversity to be a problem or a burden, but a joyful gift of God!

AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Sterne upon leaving All Saints Episcopal, Atlanta.