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Joel 2:23-28 and Acts 2:37-47
A Common Life

We have been in a season of post-resurrection appearances by Jesus. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus instructing his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they “are clothed with power from on high.” Jesus then leads them out from the city to Bethany, where he blesses them before ascending into heaven. The author Luke tells us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The Book of Acts was written by the same author as Luke and continues the story. Following the ascension, the disciples remained in Jerusalem and for the next ten days. They were joined by Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as Jesus’ brothers. Scripture tells us they spent their time devoting themselves to prayer. They added a disciple to replace Judas, casting lots. The lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles. And they waited for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Our Call to Worship this morning tells the beginning of the story of that day when the Holy Spirit arrived. I can imagine a cartoon drawn of that day, light bulbs turning on over each of the heads as they “got it,” when Peter preached of the good news of the person and work of Jesus Christ – his ministry and the salvific act of his death and resurrection. We pick up the story here in verse 37 of Acts Chapter 2.

Now when they (that is the crowds) heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

The Christian Year is divided almost in half between “holy” or set apart seasons and Ordinary Time. We are in the hinge Sunday – having celebrated Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Eastertide this year, we will be in Ordinary Time until Advent begins on the last Sunday of November. I think it is significant that the birth of the church marks this transition. The rhythm of alternating between seasons of preparation and celebration and the stories of Jesus’ ministry and Old Testament ancestors of the faith is a good representation of what it means to be a church.

Acts 2 begins with a gathering statement. “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” As we look back through our Christian lens, we say, of course they were all gathered, wearing their red. It was Pentecost and that is what we do. But these gathered folks were not Christian, so why were they all there hanging out on a hill in Jerusalem? They were there to celebrate Festival of Weeks. This is an ancient Jewish pilgrimage and harvest festival celebrated 50 days (or 7 weeks) after Passover. In Leviticus 23:16 we hear, “You shall count until the day after the seventh Sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.”

Unlike many religious festivals, the Festival of Weeks was not limited to the Jewish people. This harvest festival was expansive, diverse, and inclusive of various populations who dwelled together. Deuteronomy 16:11 tells us, “Rejoice before the Lord your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.” If you were looking for festival where diverse peoples would gather, the Festival of Weeks, Shavuot (in Hebrew) or Pentecost (signifying 50 in Greek) would be it.

Over time this festival also came to mark the reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai. And this is particularly significant for us as we think about our common life. When the Hebrew people left Egypt to begin their venture through the wilderness to Canaan, they were a motley crew (not the 80’s hair band, although there might have been some similarities after 40 years of wandering with nary a barber shop in sight). Rather they were diverse, with varied backgrounds, not all of them being blood descendants of the Hebrew ancestors. They struggled with organization. Moses did his best, but as we read in the books of Exodus and Numbers, there was a lot of whining and complaining going on, fights between siblings and those on the “inside of power” and “those on the outside.” Think of any long car ride you have done with family, especially one where you might have missed a turn or gotten lost along the way. God knew that some guidelines were needed to shape this group of separate individuals into a community. So on Mt. Sinai the people gathered and through Moses God delivered rules – commandments – a covenant with the people. The first four explained the ways the people were to share a common life with God and the last six how they were to share a common life with each other.

So we put ourselves in the gathered crowds on that Pentecost Sunday... they were a diverse group ... in our Call to Worship we skipped over the listing... 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. These were people of the Jewish faith who had spread far and wide in the diaspora. And as we hear, the crowds also included non-Jewish Gentiles, the beginnings of spreading the ministry of Jesus beyond Galilee and Judea. Into the mix of peoples...and I don't think the diversity perspective should be minimized – this was a broad representation of the peoples not just next door, but from distant lands, Luke says all of the known world - into this mix of peoples, the Holy Spirit arrives. As one commentator notes: "The scene is spectacular and chaotic: a violent, rushing sound like wind, and then "divided tongues, as of fire" — not a fire that destroys, but rather a fire like the one Moses encountered at the burning bush, which was "blazing, yet it was not consumed." ...The upshot of all of this is a sense of togetherness and unity: diverse as they are, from various lands and cultures, everyone understands and can communicate. Accordingly, they're dazzled and taken aback, asking, "What does this mean?"¹

What does this mean? What does it mean that we, this gathering of different cultures and ethnicities, different languages and faith traditions are called to share this moment in common? Peter answers with a bold sermon quoting the prophet Joel – the passage Jennifer read. For those who knew the Hebrew scriptures, Joel would have been significant because it was set in a time of transition after the Hebrew people have returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. The people were unsure of what was next, of how to form a community and of how to worship God. Joel speaks to the hope of a new creation and how God's divine presence will once again become accessible and real among all God's people. The scripture ends with: "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

Joel's vision is an inclusive one: God's spirit is poured out on all flesh – all flesh. So is the work of the Holy Spirit. A dynamic and diverse community is birthed. Jesus' ministry inaugurated this new era, teaching and healing and dining with all. All were welcome to his table. And now the Spirit will empower the community to live into Jesus' mission. Jesus tells us that we are to be his body in the world after his death and resurrection. This is no small task, and Jesus knows we cannot do this on our own. Even with the incredible gift of the Holy Spirit, we struggle mightily with living into this vision of an inclusive common life.

If I were Peter and the other disciples, I would both be awed by this experience and a bit taken aback. They were going from being a tight knit group of people with a least some commonality in background, at least speaking the same language and eating the same foods, to a group

¹ Salt Project. Commentary for Pentecost. Online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/6/3/beginning-again-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-pentecost>

where there was going to be a shift from the dominance of one tradition to a shared, egalitarian, diverse and inclusive vision of the Jesus' kingdom. I'm not sure this was Peter's five-year plan for growing the church. But Jesus was serious when he said, "Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep."

As one commentator notes, Pentecost is both "Happy Birthday" for the church, and it is also "Let's go!" The church is not a building ... nor is it a particular membership or group of people. Rather, at its heart, the church is a mission, God's mission, the adventurous challenge of understanding and connecting with neighbors near and far. To listen and learn and speak each other's languages. To celebrate and serve with the Spirit's winds in our sails. In an age of polarizing fear and division, contempt and conflict, the church's mission — the essence of Pentecost — has never been more pressing. *Understand and connect!*²

This is the heart of Pentecost. When we are baptized by the Spirit we open ourselves up to a radical transformation. We hear in the Book of Acts that following their baptisms, the newly minted faithful devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. So while we often think of Holy Spirit moments as deeply personal, and they are, they are often deeply communal as well. Scripture tells us that the transforming act of the Holy Spirit was to create community – to create a community of believers who worshipped, prayed, ate and studied together. It was then, and is now, all about community, about the common life we share.

This message of Pentecost is echoed in our words of preparation in the bulletin: "In our social and political moment, we need Pentecost. Division, hatred, and pain mark our nation. Hearts must be transformed and attuned to practices of divine love. ... The joy of Pentecost is that it gives us a vision and hope for a community made possible through the work of the Spirit. This miracle involves being open to the shocking and surprising ways of the Spirit, which empowers us to reach across differences in order to experience radical and insurgent communions."³

We are called to share a common life through the gift of the Holy Spirit: A gift that personally brings us renewal and restoration and sometimes disrupts life as we know it. And communally the gift of the Spirit does likewise: brings the church renewal and restoration and sometimes disrupts church life as we know it. And along the way, both as individuals and as a community, we are transformed by the breath of God. A breath that is shared, a breath that unites us, a breath that can light the world if we let it. The question is will we let it? Will we let the Holy Spirit shape our common life, moving us from seeing our siblings as "the other" – other cultures, other languages, other citizenships, other ethnicities, other identities; will we let the Holy Spirit move us to become people with glad and generous hearts, praising God and seeking the goodwill of all the people. Join me in prayer.

² *ibid*

³ Keri L. Day, We need a Pentecost. Divisions mark our society—and our churches. What could possibly bring us together? *Christian Century*. May 9, 2018. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/critical-essay/we-need-pentecost>