

PENTECOST SUNDAY, May 19, 2024, Year B

- A few days ago, along with Karen and others from Grace, I stood on an ancient stone street composed of pieces of old marble. We were on *the very street* upon which St. Paul had walked when *he* was in Ephesus, 2,000 years ago. Paul was on *that same street* during one of his missionary journeys, and spent time trying to convert the Jews there. He also tried to persuade the Ephesians to give up their worship of the fertility-mother goddess, *Artemis*. To Artemis, the Greeks had dedicated a temple that was one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. Only one column is left standing there - reassembled from fragments of the 127 that composed that astonishing architectural achievement. But Paul's stirring words in his letter to the Ephesians, *still stand* as a testament to abiding truth.
- "There is one Body and one Spirit ; there is one hope in God's call to us..." Paul was focused on the God-given, true things that unite us, that hold us together, which give us life. But in contemporary American culture, everything now seems to center on *how we differ* from one another.
- Some years ago, I discovered a wonderful contemporary painting about *Pentecost*, which reflects the presence of such differences (I have put a copy in your worship bulletin). The image is by Peter Warden, and is based on our story from Acts. Peter Warden portrays the disciples together in their upper room retreat.¹ But, *in this case*, the first Christian community is gathered in a *20th Century Scottish attic!* The painting seems to capture the disciples *just at the moment when* the mighty Spirit-wind and tongues of fire appear. In other words, *these disciples are not yet bound together, and not yet ready for mission.*
- Though they're in the *same* room, *these disciples* show *few signs of unity ~ reacting against* one another, as much as they *talk together*.² Notice the suggestively peeling wallpaper behind the group. *Can you see the pattern* the artist has created *with the lower part of it?* If you look closely, you can

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see how the artist has used his depiction of that scrappy wallpaper to suggest Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting of the last supper. Da Vinci's painting has also suffered the fate of being on a peeling wall. Peter Warden portrays a group of people with *a shared history*, who were brought together by Jesus at their earlier supper with him. But *now, after* his death, they find themselves *regressing* - regressing to their *before-Jesus* identities, and falling back upon their *differences* from one another.

- Yet, *as the painting's title suggests*, in just *this* moment God's Holy Spirit has *found them*. Just as, *through the Church*, God's Spirit *finds us*. When God's Spirit *finds* us, we are grafted into the Body of Christ. In the process, we come to perceive who *we really are*. For we receive *a new baptismal identity* through the Church. It builds upon and transforms the uniqueness of our natural, biological-identity. Our *baptismal*-identity emphasizes a *new* way of seeing ourselves in relation to others. For *now*, we *also* celebrate what we *share* and have *in common*, rather than simply emphasize how we are *unique* and *different* from others.
- This is why we begin the Baptismal rite in *The Book of Common Prayer* with Paul's words from Ephesians: "There is **one** Body, and **one** Spirit; There is **one** hope in God's call to us; **One** Lord, **One** Faith, **One** Baptism; **One** God and Father **of all**."³ These spiritual words parallel our familiar and largely secular phrase, *e pluribus unum*, or, "Out of many, one." Originally, the phrase referred to how a single nation emerged from many Colonies. And so, "out of many peoples, races, religions... and ancestries has emerged a single people and nation," inspiring the metaphor of the melting-pot.⁴
- The metaphor of pilgrimage also provides an evocative way to speak of our *common* experience. And it expresses how we commonly experience life as a 'journey.' Our life-journey often begins with a starting point wherein we experience our uniqueness and *aleness*. In childhood, we feel *separate*

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from others, and even from ourselves. And then, *as we journey, we experience ourselves as found by God, and found by others* in significant relationships. And along the way, *we find ourselves*. In other words, we find ourselves *as we experience being found*, found by God, and found by others who become important in our lives.

- Through *hearing* and *reading* Scripture, and in our fellowship with others in Jesus' beloved community, we learn something very important. It has to do with this matter of *our identity*. We learn that the "*Who am I?*" question cannot *rightly* be answered *apart* from the "*Who are we?*" question. And, in turn, the "*Who are we?*" question cannot *rightly* be answered *apart* from another question: "*Who are we made to be?*" Once we ask, "*Who are we made to be?*", we are on the threshold of *discovering, perhaps for the first time* in our lives, *who we really are*, both as individuals, *and in community*.
- Therefore, we remind ourselves of *our new reality*, the reality that Paul's words refer to. Through God's mission in the world, there is now one Body, and one Spirit. Moving beyond *individual* aspirations and our *private* desires, we see that there is now one hope in God's call to us. *Before* Baptism, each of us functioned as if we were *our own* captain and master. Yet, *now* we defer to one Lord, who leads us. Previously we believed that everyone has *their own truth*. Yet, through the Church, we come to know there is—*for us*—one Faith. Recognizing these things, we commit ourselves to the mission of the one God, who is the Father of us all.
- Here is the truth of this great feast day: God's Spirit has *come down!* God's Spirit has come down *upon, and within*, people who are sometimes alienated, and who often fall short of God's mission. Preoccupied with ourselves and our own pursuits, we *then* experience a *transformation*. We are drawn into relationship. As we are, we find meaning and we find purpose. We discover who we are, *as we discern* what we are called to do

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together. The mission of God brings both mercy and meaning. In it, we discover a *shared* life in God's *Spirit-shaped* Kingdom.



Peter Warden, *Pentecost* (1985)

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Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

 `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.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.
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.' "

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Notes:

¹ Note that, based on Acts 1:15, the group implied by the reference to who “were all together in one place,” in Acts 2:1, may include not only the eleven (or twelve, counting the addition of Matthias), but also the 120 persons mentioned in that earlier verse.

² This is significant, especially in relation to the possibility that those who are referenced here, are more than one hundred in number rather than more than ten in number. (see note 1, above)

³ See Ephesians 4:4-6, upon which this quote from the *Book of Common Prayer* are based.

⁴ Quote from the Wikipedia article, *E pluribus unum*.