

The Spirit of Love, Our Hope, and Our Unity

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, May 31, 2020)

The God of Love within me honors the God of love within you. It is this spirit of love that keeps us connected at all times and in all places. Thanks be to God.

My friends this is the last Sunday of the series 'Heart of the Matter,' and it is Pentecost Sunday. This series has enabled us to connect the central message of Jesus' ministry, the message of love, to our lives in these pandemic times. Love IS the way, the light and the hope of life as we go forward into an unknown future. Just as all the post-resurrection stories have offered relevant and meaningful messages, the Pentecost story provides its own profound and relevant message.

Pentecost (from a Greek word for "fiftieth") is the fiftieth and last day of the Easter season. It is the Christian reinterpretation of an ancient Jewish pilgrimage festival, the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot (pronounced "sha-voo-OAT"), celebrated 50 days after Passover. For the ancient Israelites, this festival was an agricultural feast highlighting the end of the grain harvest and later became a celebration marking the reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai. For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the reception of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. Happy Birthday!

The story of Pentecost, found in the Book of Acts, derives from an earlier account found in Genesis 11. The Genesis story is about a group of people scattered all over the Earth and speaking in different languages that none of them could understand. In the Acts story, the 'group of people' is the community of disciples who have gathered with other followers of Jesus. The story is quite spectacular, using images from the ancient Hebrew scriptures depicting the spirit of God as wind and fire.

The scene is chaotic: a violent rushing, sound like the wind, and then "divided tongues, as a fire" appears. The fire does not harm; it is like the fire that Moses saw in the burning bush story, which was "'blazing' yet was not consumed."

The Spirit, described as wind and fire, fills the place. Suddenly they are speaking various languages, yet at the same time, each person hears the testimony of Peter in his or her native tongue. To understand the story, we might imagine a meeting at the United Nations. People from around the world gather to discuss global issues and each person wears a headset in order to hear translations in his or her language.

The difference is that rather than there being many translators, it's the Spirit that is translating. The United Nations meeting, and the Pentecost

story are good examples of unity within diversity. People speaking a variety of languages come together in solidarity to discuss an issue. In the story, while people may speak different languages, what they all understand is the language of the Spirit of God, the language of love. The spirit of love binds people together in unity amid their diversity.

Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit to empower the people, and in so doing, he initiated a new era of love. Here the Pentecost story draws on Hebraic texts that articulate the ancient people's understanding of God's "breath" or "spirit" imbuing all life bringing renewal, insight, and responsibility. For the newly forming churches, the 'breath' or 'spirit' brings new energy and new life that leads to further growth and change.

A dynamic group of people, followers of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the burden and responsibility of carrying out God's mission of healing, liberation, and joy for the love of the world. These are the bridge-builders, visionaries, and dreamers of a new movement that will help shape new communities of faithful followers of the way of love and justice. The church is born!

Today we want to acknowledge that Pentecost has a far-reaching message beyond the boundaries of the church. Its message is relevant not only for us now but also for our future as a global community. One commentary on this story suggests that "The story of Pentecost reverses the ancient Genesis story of Babel's Tower. In an arrogant attempt to "make a name for ourselves," humanity tries to build a tower with its top in the heavens – God scatters them by diversifying their languages."

In the Pentecost story, "instead of humanity presumptuously ascending toward heaven, God graciously descends to Earth; and instead of humanity being linguistically fragmenting, the Spirit brings people together, bridging divides so we can understand and connect." The spirit challenges and invites a new understanding of what it means to be loving in a diverse, complex, and aggressive world. Diversity, rooted in the spirit of love, becomes the foundation for unity.

For me, Episcopalian Bishop John Spong articulates the message of Pentecost, how the spirit of love creates unity within diversity. He writes, "Suppose we change our God definition. Suppose we take God out of the sky. . .and suppose we begin to think of God as a presence at the very heart of life. If God is the source of life, then God is present in you, and me, and in the whole created order. And if God is the source of life, then the only way you worship God is by living. Living fully. Sharing life, giving life away, not being afraid, wandering out of the certain into the uncertain, out of known into the unknown.

If God is the source of love, then the only way you can worship God is by loving. Not by being right, but by loving. By loving wastefully. The image in my mind is an old sink in the basement that you plug up the drains, and you turn on all the [taps], and the water overflows the boundaries and goes all over the floor and fills up every crack and cranny. . . and never stops to ask whether that crack deserves this living water . . . You love because love is what you must do, not because somebody deserves love. You love wastefully.

If God is the ground of being then the only way you and I can worship God is by having the courage to be all that we can be, in the infinite variety of our humanity. Whether we are male or female, gay or straight, transgender or bisexual, white or black or yellow or brown, left-handed or right-handed, brilliant or not quite so brilliant. No matter what the human difference is, you have something to offer in your own being.

Nobody else can offer what you have to offer, and the only way you can worship God is by daring to be all that you can be, and not be bound by the fears of yesterday."

As a church, as individuals, as a diverse, dynamic world living in a pandemic age, we all must be all that we can be, in the spirit of love, as we live and love fully.

In a lectionary commentary, Dominican Sister Carol J. Dempsey writes, "COVID-19, a global pandemic. . .has wreaked havoc on so many lives. It has created gaping holes in the fabric of human life regardless of race, creed, economic and ethnic background, orientation, gender, or class. As the death tolls rise amid frayed nerves and fears that have cut right into our cores, we all wonder what life is going to be like once COVID-19 ceases to dominate.

Now a spirit of compassion, generosity, ingenuity, hospitality, and creativity binds the human species together, making us realize that despite our diversity and different social and geographical locations, we are all one in this common global pandemic experience.

This 'oneness' being experienced is an invitation for the human community to reach deep within itself to discover what truly binds us one to another. Certainly, the bond is not COVID-19." The bond is, as Spong suggested, "the God of Love at the very heart of life." The bond is "the Spirit of divine love poured out into all creation, all life, all people." The Pentecost story reminds us of what truly joins us together, and what joins us together, is the spirit of love expressed fully, wastefully, and unconditionally to all created life.

In this age of distance, fear, and fragmentation, the message of Pentecost, is understanding and connection. It is about letting the breath of the spirit of love enable us to live fully, love wastefully, and be all that we can be. I close with this prayer by Steven Davies called 'Hearts ablaze.'

God,
may we say "yes" to you
so that the spirit in our hearts
will once again be set ablaze.

Spirit of Wisdom,
guide our actions so they tell of God's love.

Spirit of Truth,
open our eyes to see the world as it really is.

Spirit of Power,
enthuse us to work for justice throughout the world.

Spirit of Love,
inspire us to respect the dignity of each person.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill us.

Come, Holy Spirit.

Come. Amen.