

Different People, Same Spirit

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May 20, 2018

Acts 2:1-17 — 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 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 the 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, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only 9:00 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 daughters shall prophesy, and the young shall see visions, and the elders shall dream dreams.’”

They knew it was coming. Jesus had told his followers that after he left this world, the Spirit of God would come to them and dwell in them as their guide, as a divine source of wisdom, strength, and peace. According to the Book of Acts, Jesus reminded his followers of this just before he ascended into Heaven, assuring them that the Holy Spirit would empower them to be witnesses for Christ throughout the world. They knew it was coming—but they didn’t know when or how it would come. So, they all just waited together, all 120 or so of Jesus’s disciples, all sharing a life of prayer and fellowship, all trusting that God’s Spirit was on the way.

“And suddenly,” the story tells us, a sound like the rush of a violent wind fills the entire house, and everyone inside is filled as well, with a power that cannot be explained or contained. It spills out onto Jerusalem’s busy streets and catches the attention of hundreds of bystanders, who are from all over the world and who speak a wide variety of languages. Realizing that the time is now, Peter stands up in front of the growing crowd and somehow proclaims to all of them that Jesus, who was crucified and resurrected, is their savior, is the presence and power of God on earth, freeing, uniting, and reviving all God’s people. And this presence and power of God, Peter declares, is among the bystanders in this Holy Spirit—the same Spirit who we declare is among

us now. The story of Pentecost, friends, is the story of where we come from—that is, the story of what got the Church, the community of Christ-followers, started. It is also a story about where we're going, about who we were made to be and what we were made to do.

I've read this story dozens of times over the course of my life, but it was only a few years ago that I first observed what I think is one of the most important details of this story and its meaning for us today. I have Dr. Eric Barreto, a biblical scholar at Princeton Seminary, to thank for this observation, which has to do with the languages spoken by the disciples when the Spirit descends on them and starts speaking through them. Notice that the Spirit does not miraculously enable the bystanders to understand the disciples as the disciples speak in their *own* language; rather the Spirit miraculously enables the disciples to speak in languages that are foreign to them, so that the bystanders can understand the disciples in *their* own language. In other words, the Spirit does not erase the diversity of languages present. The Spirit does not enforce a single language that belongs to the disciples or even to God. The Spirit does not convert the bystanders out of their cultural heritage. Rather, the Spirit culturally converts the disciples. The Spirit places words that are foreign to them into their mouths. And in so doing, the Spirit preserves and blesses the many cultural differences roaming Jerusalem's streets.

For me, this observation has shed a new, almost staggering light on a question that many of us have asked, at one point or another. The question is this: Wouldn't life be easier if we were all the same? If we all spoke the same language, all held the same values, all lived our lives according to the same norms, wouldn't we avoid so many of the tensions and conflicts that seem to threaten our communities and our world? If we all shared a common culture, wouldn't we all be better off?

First, to echo Dr. Barreto, I think we should acknowledge that when we say things like "Life would be easier if we were all the same," what we're *really* saying is "Life would be easier if we were all like me." I mean, if we're gonna be honest with ourselves, something like that is on the back of our minds. That said, I do think that our desire for sameness can be driven by admirable impulses and inclinations. For example, many of us are in tune with realities of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other injustices in our world, and if we were all the same (or at least if the world had consistently regarded and treated all of us as the same), then much of the hatred, fear, and violence we see today wouldn't exist. Moreover, as Christians, we can point to places in our Scriptures that use language of sameness to describe us. For example, the Bible says, again and again, that we are all adopted children of God. So, wouldn't it be fitting if we, as Christians, prioritized our theological sameness and downplayed all the worldly features that differentiate us from our other siblings in Christ?

Certainly, there is something desirable about that approach, but ultimately, it misses the mark that God sets for us. Because our adoption as God's children does not undo our differences; rather, it undoes any claim to superiority (or inferiority) based on our differences. In other words, we are not made to be the same; we are made to be equal. That is, all of God's children—including the Phrygians, the Pamphylans, and all the other people groups in Acts 2 that you and I know

absolutely nothing about—all of God’s children have equal, inestimable worth in the eyes of their creator and savior. From God’s perspective, the differences of language, culture, race, gender, ability, age, sexual orientation, and more—they aren’t problems to be fixed, trifles to be ignored, or nuisances to be tolerated; they are gifts to be celebrated. And God invites each of us to delight in this diversity as we strive to enact God’s vision of equality.

So, how do we do that? Well, the story of Pentecost suggests that, however we do it, it’s going to take us out of our comfort zones; it’s going to bring us into contact with things and into communion with people who feel foreign to us; it’s going to be confusing and challenging at times.

Those of you who attended my ordination last year have visited my home church in New York City, Judson Memorial Church. Just a few months after that celebratory day, two of Judson’s members, Jean and Ravi, were detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. Both men entered this country legally decades ago. Both have worked hard to obtain permanent legal status, but strict, rigid immigration laws have prevented them from doing so. Ravi was convicted of wire fraud in a dubious trial almost 20 years ago, for which he served time, and Jean was convicted of cocaine possession almost 30 years ago, for which he also served time. Since then, both men have been upstanding and productive residents, fully compliant with ICE in their regular, required check-ins. Both Jean and Ravi have spouses who are American citizens, and Jean is currently raising three children who are American citizens. Both men have been active in advocating for immigration reform, which leads many insiders to conclude that ICE’s New York City office targeted them. Ravi was unexpectedly detained at a regular check-in meeting, and Jean was picked up right outside of his house on his way to work. Both of them were flown to the same detention center outside of Miami, and for a night they shared a cell.

I was at Judson for a service on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day when we all learned that our friend Jean was being deported to Haiti later that day. The sudden gasps and cries from the congregation were like the rush of a violent wind, filling the entire house of worship with grief and anger. After the service, our energy spilled onto the streets in a rally on Jean’s behalf and on behalf of all undocumented immigrants from whom compassion is routinely withheld. As I saw it, this was a Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. I don’t know what Pentecost will look like in your life or in this congregation’s life down the road. But I do know that the Spirit is inviting you to honor God’s countless gifts of diversity in the world, inviting you to let yourself be confused and challenged by that which seems foreign, inviting you to grow and delight in hospitality, generosity, and forgiveness. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.