

All Together in One Place and Speaking the Same Language

A sermon for the Festival of Pentecost - May 31, 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

Acts 2:1-11 - Julian Gordy

On the day before Pentecost in 2012, I was invited as the synod's bishop to preach and preside at an unusual service held in our synod's oldest congregation, Jerusalem Church on the Georgia Coast. Jerusalem Church was founded by Lutherans from what is now Austria after they were forced to leave their homes by the new Catholic prince back in the 18th Century

A utopian British Lord named John Edward Oglethorpe, who was establishing a new colony as a buffer between the British in South Carolina and the Spaniards in Florida heard of their plight and invited them to come to the new colony of Georgia. In 1734, the Salzburger became some of the first settlers of my home state. Today, an ELCA congregation still worships in a beautiful building those first Salzburger finished in 1769, at least that's where they worship when they are not in pandemic mode.

Outside that historic church building is a cemetery with an impressive brick and wrought iron wall surrounding dozens of graves. Not long before that Pentecost Eve service, a couple of archeologists using ground sonar discovered that there were numerous other graves *outside* the wall. Some, in front of the cemetery, very likely contain the bodies of dozens of British soldiers who died of yellow fever when they were quartered there during the Revolutionary War.

The sonar also revealed dozens of other graves in a copse of trees behind the cemetery. These are almost certainly the final resting places of enslaved Africans and their descendants, some of them, likely the bodies of the victims of the Ebenezer Creek Massacre when General Sherman's Union Army abandoned a large group of former slaves who were following it north, leaving these men, women and children stranded between the water and the oncoming Confederate cavalry. It is a sad chapter in American history.

That Saturday, after a service of Holy Communion in the church, we all moved out to the cemetery where the Vice Mayor of Savannah laid a wreath at the site of the British soldiers' graves and some of the Salzburger descendants placed a huge wreath at the site of the graves of the enslaved people.

In his remarks, Savannah's Vice Mayor commented on the diversity of the congregation gathered that morning to consecrate the graves and the diversity of those buried in those graves - enslaved Africans, British soldiers, Salzburger Lutherans, and all the rest - "but today, on the eve of Pentecost," he said, "here we are *all together in one place, speaking the same language.*" It was a moving experience to see a little bit of reconciliation on a hot

South Georgia day in a place that has known far more than its share of conflict through the years.

“All together in one place, speaking the same language.” I thought about that Friday when I saw the news from Atlanta, the city of my childhood - in fact - the city that has been the geographical center of much of my life - the city “too busy to hate.” To see Atlanta in turmoil as angry people reacted to the news of the death of George Floyd, yet another unarmed black man killed in police custody. Cars were set afire, windows broken out, as a peaceful demonstration turned violent. All of this just a couple of blocks from where my office was for most of the last dozen years.

Mr. Floyd’s death followed on the heels of the death of another black man in Georgia. Ahmaud Arbery, a young man out for a jog in a quiet neighborhood, hunted down and murdered in the street. You can understand the anger even if you can’t countenance the violence.

Then last night, as I read on-line about the violence that broke out here in Nashville after a rally against police brutality. This morning’s news brought word that this has happened in cities across the country.

How long, O Lord, how long! Why can’t we get around or through or over the seemingly intractable racism that has plagued America for so long? What can heal the divisions that have wounded us for so long?

And so, I abandoned the sermon I had written earlier in the week - you can catch a reworked version of that Wednesday if you like.

I started over because I think it may be instructive for us who are Christ’s church to take a look at what the Spirit that stirred up the crowd at Pentecost stirred them up to **do**.

At his ascension just a few days before Pentecost, Jesus had promised the disciples that something big was going to happen soon, something involving power and the Spirit. And it did. The Spirit dropped in on this little band of Jesus’ followers locked up in an upper room and - as Emeril used to say, bam! - they were kicked up a notch!

They were changed. These followers - who never quite figured out what Jesus was up to, even after his resurrection - finally got it. The rest of the book of Acts tells us how these now-Spirited followers of Jesus turned the world upside down with their message of God’s love for the whole world, a love that breaks down every barrier that separates one of us from another of us. “In Christ,” said St. Paul, “there is no male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free.”

To make that inclusive point, right off the bat, there in the streets of Jerusalem at the first Pentecost, the Spirit made the church multicultural and inclusive! Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Arabs, Capodocians and all those hard-to-pronounce folk - it didn't matter! They were all part of what was happening here, all those different ethnic groups and cultures and traditions, all together in the same place and understanding each other even if they weren't speaking the same language.

The same Spirit that fell on Jesus in his baptism now falls on his followers. And like Jesus, like the **Body** of Christ they now are, they take on Jesus' agenda as their own. Here they are in the streets preaching good news to the poor and forgiveness to prisoners. Soon they will be offering recovery of sight to the blind and working to set the burdened and battered free. Through these formerly cowardly disciples, God is at work for the sake of the world.

The church in Acts is not a gathering of like-minded people, enjoying each other's company and keeping up the traditions of the ancestors. No, the church that was filled with the Spirit on Pentecost Day became the very *body of Christ*, stirring things up, moving into the world with power on behalf of the poor and the imprisoned and the blind and the burdened and the oppressed, the ones counted as the least of people.

Evangelical leader Tony Campolo tells of sitting down to dinner in a restaurant in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Seated next to the front window, he looked up from his plate to discover three little boys with their faces pressed against the window, staring at his plate full of food.

The waiter came by, pulled down the shade, and said, "Don't let them bother you, enjoy your meal."¹

Some of us see the church like that. We want it to be like that restaurant where someone will pull the shade so that we don't have to see the hunger and misery in the world. We think the church ought to be a place of comfort, a refuge from a hungry, demanding, despairing, depressing, divided world.

And while the church does offer comfort, a church that does only that is not the church the Holy Spirit dropped in on at Pentecost.

In fact, Annie Dillard once wrote that if we really **got** church as Jesus envisions it, really comprehended the wild Spirit of God that enlivens the church, the ushers would pass out **hard hats** along with the Sunday bulletins! Well, sad to say, ushers are not passing out

¹Campolo, *Red Letter Christians*, p. 24

anything these days, but you get the point. Church is not safe because God's churchly agenda is nothing less than to change us, and then, through us, to change the whole world.

We might like the safety and comfort of the sanctuary, but the Spirit of Jesus keeps demanding that we throw up the shades and engage the world that God made and still loves in all its divided and unpleasant reality.

In Second Corinthians, St. Paul writes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself..., and **entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.**"

Reconciliation - that is the work the Spirit was beginning at Pentecost.

After all that has happened in Minneapolis and Atlanta and Nashville and New York and Los Angeles this week, after all the decades of racism and division, of misunderstanding and hatred, reconciliation seems like an impossible mission. Still, dear friends in Christ, that is our calling. As followers of Jesus reconciliation is our job.

In a world of division and anger God has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation! I hope we can take that seriously as we ought. I hope we can become committed to that mission even if, frankly, it does seem impossible after a week like this one.

In a world where some lives seem to matter more than others, where some political leaders stoke the fires of anger and division, where choosing sides is more in vogue than listening to one another, the work of forgiveness, the work of bearing the **cross** of Christ and the **peace** of Christ - the work of reconciliation is **our** work and it is desperately needed.

And the good news this Pentecost morning is this: We are not called to do this impossible work without help. The **same Spirit** that dropped in at Pentecost and turned the world upside down through those first believers, that same Spirit has called and gathered us together at St. Andrew. The same Spirit that brought all those diverse people together in the streets of Jerusalem is still present with us, here to encourage us and help us or, maybe, to push us into our ministry of reconciliation that we have been entrusted with.

So let's keep the shades up, let's engage the world, however unpleasant that may be, in the name of the one who died so that the world might be reconciled to God and one another, the one who now calls us to the ministry of reconciliation among all people until we are all together in one place and speaking the same language, the language of God's love for the whole world. Amen.

