

The Gift of Diversity

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes Norfleet
From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

June 8, 2025

Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹

Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:¹⁷ ‘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.¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

If there were ever a day to move us a bit out of our comfort zone in worship, surely this is the day, the great windy, flaming birthday of the church. “What does this mean?” the congregation found themselves asking on that first day of Pentecost, as the Spirit blew through the gathering of people from all over the known world. “What does this mean?” they asked as tongues of fire hovered over their heads. “What does this mean?” was the question on everyone’s lips because they were bewildered, amazed and perplexed that people were speaking every language of the world and yet they all understood one another.

It may seem like an altogether brand new phenomenon that no one had experienced before, but Luke wants us to know that this work of the Spirit was not, as they might have thought, altogether new. It was the same old manifestation of God, but this time, revealed in a startling new way. Those devout Jews knew the power of God’s Spirit, because they knew the scriptures and the story of God’s people. It was the wind of God that hovered over the primordial chaos of planet Earth, and said “Let there be,” on the very first day of creation, out of chaos, bringing order and goodness. Those devout Jews knew fire. Out of the flames of a burning bush God spoke to Moses, and a pillar of fire had led them by night out of slavery into freedom. Those devout Jews also knew about the manifestation of languages. They remembered how the people tried to build the Tower of Babel to heaven so that they could be more like God, and because of their idolatry, God confused their languages and scattered them over the face of the earth. Some people like to say that Pentecost was largely the Tower of Babel story reversed! But remember God’s judgement is always wrapped in a blanket of grace. Today, more biblical scholars say the scattering from Babel was the final gift of God in

creation, the gift of diversity: with multi-colored people, each made in the image of God, speaking different languages across the globe.

Pentecost is not so much a brand new manifestation of God's power as it is a reminder of God's love for the world populated by human diversity. That's why Peter had no need to write a new sermon for the occasion. He pulled out a very old sermon from the prophet Joel to preach that day! *Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.* Same old prophetic hope, same old God, Same old Holy Spirit.

The thing that is new on the Day of Pentecost is simply this: Jesus had been raised from the dead, had ascended to heaven, and through the Risen Christ God announced a new kind of conspiracy with the human family. Not in the sense that we usually associate with the word "conspiracy," as in some sinister plot, but rather – as a consensus for good. *Con - with*, and *spire* means *to breathe*. Conspiracy, literally means "breathing together." Pentecost is the miracle of a multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-lingual diverse people gathered to breathe together, to listen, to hear and to understand one another.

Now, while it's fun to focus on the pyrotechnics of the story; the violent wind and the flames of fire as evidence of God's power, at this moment in time, I think we are being called to consider the gentler invitation of this text - to remember God's gift of diversity as an invitation to breathe together. Right now, in this country, by the powers that be human diversity is under attack. This week's decision by the Trump administration to forbid people from twelve different countries entrance

into the United States is an attack on God's gift of diversity. The ban begins at midnight tonight. Mine is not so much a political statement as it is a deeply biblical and theological one. Human diversity – across geography, race and language is God's gift, not to be feared but to be embraced and treasured, a source for exploring God's goodness and seeking understanding.

When I consider that twelve country travel ban, I think of the friend I made through the global hunger ministry of my last congregation. The Reverend Dr. Haruun Ruun, a Presbyterian pastor from South Sudan, engaged our church and presbytery to help address extreme hunger there during years of famine. Haruun was once forced out of Sudan and into exile by Islamist extremists; he pursued a theological education, and when he could return to Sudan he helped the church transition from missionary to indigenous leadership. He became executive director of the New Sudan Council of Churches, committing his life to peacemaking and alleviating hunger. He's not a terrorist, but a Presbyterian pastor likely now forbidden to return to the United States because of his nationality and race. This is not the way of God.

I think of the undergraduate student who assisted our son Winston in his PhD research at Chapel Hill. She's an American citizen headed for a MD-PhD program in cancer research. Her family is from Haiti, and I imagine they now wonder if they'll see extended family again because if you are Haitian you may be banned from coming to the United States. This is not the way of God.

I have a friend serving a church in Tampa, Florida, who says fully half of her congregation have family in Cuba -- grandparents who come back and

forth from Cuba for baptisms and Confirmation and weddings. That is until Cuba got on the travel ban list too. This ban may be a distraction from other ways we are building walls, helping the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, but we are creating lists of nations whose people are unwelcome here because of their God-given diversity of race, nationality and language. This is completely counter to the way of God.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the vision of diverse people breathing together, listening to each other and seeking understanding. By the power of the resurrection of Christ, a beautiful conspiracy is meant to be underway. The Holy Spirit would never lead us where Jesus would not have us go. If Jesus is love that never gives up the Holy Spirit will guide us in that kind of love. If Jesus speaks of justice and reconciliation, the Spirit will lead us to work for peace. If Jesus says love God, neighbor and self, the Holy Spirit will lead us to understand our global neighbors.

If Jesus is gentleness, the Holy Spirit will guide us in gentleness. God loved the world in Jesus Christ, and where the Spirit leads is to celebrate diversity, to seek understanding, and to build up human community rather than build artificial walls between the races, nations and languages of God's creation.

Biblical scholar, and my old friend and colleague, Walter Brueggemann died at 92 this past week. In one of his last writings, he said this: The more we live in fear of the other, the greater is our yearning for certitude. As a consequence we formulate certitudes concerning race, gender, and class. Indeed, we go to great lengths to assure that "the right kind of people" have greater access to public resources and are assured advantage, while we imagine distinctions between the "haves" and "have-nots." The outcome is a political economy in which the advantaged accumulate even

greater advantage at the expense of the disadvantaged who lack the leverage to insist otherwise. Brueggemann went on: In the face of such powerful “social engineering” the call of the church is to resist such settled certitude, and remind people that the Holy Spirit continues the biblical ways of disrupting our arrangements of money, power, and certitude. The work of the Spirit is to upend both our self-satisfaction and our despair by re-creating a diverse world over which God presides with love and justice. He concluded: “The Spirit, given in the wonder of baptism, permits a world of races, genders, and social classes that celebrate diversity.”

Friends, on Pentecost the Spirit of God exploded like fireworks and showered down upon the whole world creating the church of Jesus Christ, turning us away from hatred, violence, cruelty and exclusion. In Christ’s name, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in this moment, we are called to a spirit of gentleness, to receive God’s diversity as a gift, to breathe together, to be a more tolerant and compassionate human family. In a word, to be the church God created us to be: a diverse community - loving, hearing and understanding God’s love for all people.

AMEN.