

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of fire, water, and all the elements that make our lives, we are called to be one people in this community. More often than not, God, our attentions shift to very unimportant things. We chase after the things that have low stakes, we chase after meager fellowship when you call us toward deep and loving fellowship. We miss the forest for the trees, God. Guide us into faithful discipleship, which leans on one another, which longs for the other's well-being, which does not settle for ease.

Today, God, we once again recognize that fateful day that created the church. The Holy Spirit swept through the city and changed the rules. The doors were flung open, and there weren't just a few disciples anymore. Help us to walk in the same example that you fostered in this story. Walk with us to be fully open to the directions of your Spirit as it directs us as it will. We recognize today that the Holy Spirit above all guides us to be bound to one another as one community with open hearts and minds to where God is calling us. Lead us to hear that voice in the many ways it presents itself, whether it comes in the way that we expect or the way you choose to reveal yourself, gracious God. We pray all these things in the name of the one who promises presence and delivers on it every day, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Oh, birthdays. How was your last birthday? I've heard from some that after a point, they just stop counting. In fact, this may sound strange, but I frankly have trouble remembering my own age from time to time. We just celebrated my father's 61st birthday this last week. He said anymore, it's not "Happy Birthday," it's just "another birthday." But birthdays are important. We shouldn't forget them. Some you just want to live through,

but some birthdays are memorable. They can change you. There was one birthday I thought I'd just live through, but it turned out to be unforgettable. The first time I went to Pennsylvania with my future wife, it was over Thanksgiving 2011. My birthday fell on the return day to Colorado. The day kept getting worse. Our flight was delayed several hours. We were stuck in Baltimore's Airport with nothing to do. On top of that, my Bears lost to the Oakland Raiders. But the first time we were on the plane, Catherine, of course, made me sit in the middle. I sat next to a very, very large man. He left when we were told to get off the plane. When we got back, the flight attendant was looking for that man. "Navorro Bowman? Are you here?" It clicked in my head that I had been sitting next to All-Pro San Francisco 49ers Linebacker Navorro Bowman. Indeed, I was sitting there and waiting for our luck to change, and all at once, things were positively unforgettable. There was a new perspective on things, and that birthday went from negative memorable to memorable for the rest of my life. It's those kind of birthdays that you never forget, they change you.

So, it was just about three months ago that we celebrated the date of the Spirit's coming to the followers of Christ. Why not celebrate it again? The disciples of Christ didn't know it was to be their new birthday on that day of Pentecost. They knew something was coming; Jesus promised the coming of the Spirit, but they did not sync their calendars. Jesus didn't send a reminder; the date was unclear. But that day became the day that would be known throughout history as the birth of the church. We celebrate it every time we come together as the church. The Spirit changed the disciples from people somewhat blindly following this Jesus Christ to group of forged followers continuing his mission. It was the incorporation of the followers of Christ into one determined body. The identity of the church took much, much longer to form. Actually, it still is forming today. We

celebrate Pentecost with red paraments, recognizing the red tongues of fire that formed over the disciples as the Holy Spirit came to be among them. What is most important, though, is that this church holiday must be celebrated together. Indeed, this is the holiday that is about community, about us coming together as a body, about us overcoming close-mindedness. Let's look at a renewed look at the church's birthday from two perspectives. Let us go back to our united birthday with what it means to be the church of Pentecost as a people who appreciate difference and looking at the work of God with an open mind.

I think one of the greatest statements of this passage from the day of Pentecost was the effect that those tongues of fire had on the disciples. They went out into the crowds in Jerusalem and began speaking different languages. When we first look at the sign of the disciples after the Spirit's coming, "unity" may not be the first word you have in mind. They go out and speak different languages among the crowds. It was confusing and difficult from the sound of the passage. But this is the church's birthday. The church should be the very definition of unity, come people who say the same things or who approach the church in entirely different ways. Perhaps, then we need to redefine what unity means in the midst of this passage and our lives together as the Christian people.

One classic interpretation of Pentecost's meaning derives from a classic text in Genesis. In the beginning, as recounted in Genesis 11, there was the Tower of Babel. The people in that community were cocky, self-righteous, and foolish. They built a tower they thought would enter Heaven and become just like gods themselves. Well, God didn't take too kindly to this. God, it was said, confused the people by creating different languages they each spoke. Of course, when you don't have your Rosetta Stone software to guide you or at least a handy translator, you aren't going to make much progress on a combined effort.

They disperse, going their own separate ways. And so, Pentecost, in a way, overturns this act. What was once a disruption to pull people apart is seen in a new way. The different languages don't go away, but there is new combined effort under the surface. There is unity in spirit. Pentecost opens the door to everyone. What was the following of only the Jewish people now is open to the Gentiles, and in time, the church recognizes this new work of God as well. Hear these facts from the Texts for Preaching commentary. Think about every other major act of salvation shown to the people; who was able to partake? The resurrection was not seen by everyone. Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain was only viewed by a couple of disciples. But here, not only is each disciple affected by the coming of the Spirit, each person in the community hears his or her native language. The Gospel goes out in every language; the Gospel is open to every language. This is a binding act of God that reverses the breaking apart. God is forming the foundation of a new community where everyone is welcome, everyone is invited. Anything less is not living up to this profound calling of God as shown through the Holy Spirit.

The disciples may be speaking different languages, but they are of one mind and one mission. Unity is can be a difficult concept, but this passage gives us a lot to work with. A week or so ago at our last Visioning meeting, we had a long discussion about what Unity in Christ means. One person said that we don't think alike. Indeed not. We should not think alike. For many of you, your Wyoming background is not the same as my Nebraska background. They are definitely not the same as Catherine's Pennsylvania background. We think in different ways, but that's better than OK; it means that we have unlimited capacity for newness and growth. We don't even believe all alike. We are called to have the same unity of faith in Christ, but we also look at the faith in different ways. This enhances the

overall Body of Christ! It says in 1 Corinthians 12, we may think that those members who are different are far more or far less important, but in any estimation, they are absolutely necessary. We have extroverts and introverts. We have people whom God has called to different tasks. We have those who are good running a committee, and we have those who want to be told what to do. We need people to call us into different mindsets with different opinions. We need all of these things to be the Body of Christ. Can you imagine the horrible possibility if the entire church was exactly like only one of us? No, God created us individually for a reason. Each of us brings a gift that none of the rest of us can offer. In a way, we each speak our own languages, not as dramatically of course as that original day of Pentecost, but we offer our differences for the benefit and growth of the greater whole.

After this grand display of God, we have two major reactions to what his going on here. We have an open-minded interpretation and a close-minded interpretation. The open-minded interpretation is one of wondering; "What does this mean?" they ask. This is the mentality of seeking, of knowing that God indeed can do something new among the people. On the other hand, we have the close-minded responders. I love the image of them sneering and saying, "They are filled with new wine." You can just see them being all self-righteous, sticking up their noses and assuming they know exactly what is going on. These people are missing the message. They believe these guys filled with the Holy Spirit are filled with other spirits that are hindering their judgment. The disciples who are the heroes of our story they deem to be drunkards! The close-minded think they know it all.

Have you ever tried to nail Jello to a wall? If you haven't, don't try it. It would make a mess and ruin some great Jello. If you have, why would you ever do that?? Anyway, the image is fantastic because it's representative of how we try to understand God. God cannot

be controlled, cannot be contained, cannot be pinned down. God is our Jello that goes its own way. Those who shirked off the message of the disciples would believe that that Jello can be contained. Many in our age follow their example. They hear a new tale and consider it too difficult to be acknowledged. They close their mind because they don't want to hear new possibilities. For them, God is best when God is always predictable, when God does as they think God should, when God is, well, tiny. But we are called to be different. We are called to acknowledge our Jello will go where it will; our God will be as God chooses to be. Sometimes we know exactly what we should do and what God would command; other times, we are to defer to the possibilities. What's important is that we open our minds and our ears to what is going on and ask for ourselves, "What does this mean?" We may be surprised to see God is moving in a way we could not anticipate.

I trace it back to a question I would have a hard time answering today. How would I recognize Jesus Christ if he came in the same way today? And that's a big question. He would not be running for the Senate or for the Presidency. He would not be in a position of authority. He would be a commonplace person. He wouldn't have a job. He would probably be homeless. When we look at this incredible act of God, working against the tide of what is expected, we begin to see a new world that truly shows God's gonna do what's God's gonna do. If we believe in this truly, it's hard to look at anything anymore and think that God can't do that. God does a new thing in every age, and to the ones who say, "What does this mean?" taking in the possibilities, we cannot respond with "they are filled with new wine," with a sneer on our faces. That just may be going against what God's doing.

OK, you loved it so much last week that I'm going to give you a pop-quiz this week. Go ahead and finish my sentence: Pentecost is the Church's...(Birthday). We observe our

Birthday as the Church by living in the Pentecost Spirit through recognizing we are all...(different), and blessed because of it. We also called not to be close minded but to be open to every movement of God, for the Spirit goes as it will. We are called to be open...(minded). Every year at Pentecost, we declare, "Happy Birthday, Church!" Even though it is, well, thousands of years old, it still acts like an infant at times. It needs to grow and change with every new age, and in every new age, it learns how to walk once again. However, in every age, it holds some of the same lessons that we as the church must learn time and time again. It is the church holiday that not only celebrates but requires that we be community. You cannot be a Christian alone. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.