

Pentecost: The Day Everything Changed  
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Someone dialed a wrong number and heard the following voicemail message: "I am not available right now, but I thank you for caring enough to call. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave me a message. If I do not return your call, you are one of those changes."

I'm sure you've heard it said that the only two things you can be certain of in life are death and taxes. This morning I add to that—change. Everything changes. Change is inescapable. The economy ebbs and flows. Our favorite TV shows end and move into syndication, sometimes after a big cliff hanger that never gets resolved.

The music we love goes from being popular to being classic to being oldies but goodies to simply being ...old. Our bodies change. We get older. We get slower. We forget where we put our keys. We forget if we took our medicine. Our kids grow up, move out, experience changes of their own.

Sometimes change is welcome. New adventures, new grandbabies, new additions to our homes. Other changes are more difficult. They push us out of our comfort zone, or shake us up, or force us to learn something new and maybe even difficult.

Today is Pentecost, and Pentecost is all about change. Pentecost was the day the Spirit blew in and shook everything up, pushed the disciples out of their comfort zones, made them rethink everything they knew about faith and religion, and gave birth to the church. It was the day the Holy Spirit initiated all people into God's kingdom and to claim God's mission in the world as our own. Pentecost was the day everything changed.

In the late 1990s, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. shared his concerns about the Balkanization of American society. He feared that tribal interests and ethnic identities would dismantle this country's fragile, unified culture. People of differing races, ethnicities, languages, religions and backgrounds living closely together could lead to disaster, he believed. Schlesinger said, and I quote: Unless a common purpose binds them together, tribal hostilities will drive them apart.<sup>1</sup> His was an argument for nationalism—the idea that all differences or cultural uniqueness should be stripped away and only a national purpose and identity should be emphasized and promoted.

Our text today from Acts 2 offers commentary on these fears. Pentecost was an amazing event! Energy that bordered on chaos, a sound like a mighty, rushing wind, and flames appearing among the people. And then, as the Holy Spirit filled that upper room and spilled over to the crowds, they spoke a multitude of languages. As the Spirit wind blew, the holy fire spread.

Here, rather than a historian's fear of diversity, people were amazed and astonished because everyone heard and understood what was being said in their own language. Though divided by culture and language, the people were united that day by a common mission. One commentator recognized this as "the in-breaking of God's purposes for all humanity, bringing humanity together in understanding, despite their differences."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schlesinger Jr., A. (1992) *The Disuniting of America: Reflections of Multicultural Society*. New York. Norton & CO. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, D. L. & Brown Taylor, B. (2010) *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Louisville, KY. Westminster John Knox Press. Ebook version, Location 742.

Acts' Pentecost story brings the Genesis creation story in full circle. In Genesis we learn that we are created in the image of God, but that image is distorted and broken because of our distrust in our creator. At Pentecost, our humanity is restored in Jesus Christ as we are invited to be co-creators with God in a new kingdom, one that offers hope and justice to all the world's diverse cultures and peoples. The Spirit unites would be enemies into a community, as many voices combine into a chorus of praise.

Not everyone on the day of Pentecost thought this newly forged community was a good idea. Some were amazed and believed that God was among them, but others thought the disciples and visitors were drunk, an easy way to dismiss the excitement of the day. But Peter quickly dismissed this notion. This isn't drunkenness, he said. It is the fulfillment of God's promises from the prophets of old, Prophets like Joel, who foreshadowed God's spirit being poured out among young and old. God's spirit has invaded the people, first through the life and work of Jesus Christ, and now through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And as a result, people will never be the same.

Pentecost reminds us that the image of God is not something that belongs to a single individual, as though God was singular and distant, closed off from all of creation, as if we were created in arrogant isolation. Rather, the image of God in which we were created is one of community, forged in the spirit of community, of creator, redeemer and spirit, an eternal and living community, differentiated in person but united in love.

Creation in the image of God is created uniquely ourselves but craving God and needing each other, never fully alive in God's image until we live in communion with one other. Just as the trinity is Father, Son and Spirit, separate but united in mission, so communion for us assumes difference, celebrating the gifts and graces each of us brings to the table. What communion is not is conformity to a single thought or idea, be it opinion, tribe or nationality.

If we think back to Schlesinger's concerns, the danger lies not in people of many different cultures, ethnicities, races and religions living in close proximity with each other, but in the insistence that we must abandon our individuality and diversity in order to prevent uprising. Fanatic nationalism, under the misnomer of patriotism, leads us to fear anyone who is different, any message that might allow for difference in perspective or point of view. So people fear difference, otherness, the strangeness of the stranger.

The danger of balkanization lies not in our differences, but in any one group's attempts to have power over others, insistence that only its identity reflects God's nature and God's way, or demand that the otherness of others be excluded from the community or eradicated from the pages of history. In the United States today we see the reality of this danger rearing itself in ugly, violent, dangerous ways. The tragedy on the Max last week is an horrific example of what can happen when we do not speak out against such attempts at power or presumption that only one culture is representative of all.

The truth is God has woven into all of creation great diversity, difference, and uniqueness. Ours is a God of many colors, cultures, expressions of belief and understandings, and ways of being. God's Spirit is what allows us to live in community with each other, hearing God's message in our own language and giving us the power to proclaim God's message in ways that everyone will hear and understand in their own ways, without having to conform to us. God's Spirit is who creates a community of love out of once was only strangers.

This Pentecost, just like the first one, the Spirit is blowing through this space, and God's holy fire rests upon us. Whether or not we will remain unchanged is up to us. Change isn't easy but if we refuse to allow the Spirit of God to inspire, motivate, shape, and move us, then we will

die. God's spirit is the oxygen that gives us life and the fire that fuels our mission and gives us vision.

Even if we say we are ready to change, we must be prepared for the whole truth of what that means. We have to, right here and now, be willing to let go of the things we like, our own preferences to invite others to influence our work and our worship.

We have to, right here and now, abandon our viewpoint that this is all about us and what we can do for the community, and allow God to create a new community in this space, one that is for all people, a place where we worship but we do not claim the power for ourselves. We have believe that we are part of a larger community, unique and important, but piece of a larger mosaic that is made of many cultures, personalities and preferences.

Today, may we let go of our preconceived notions and insistence that we are right and others are wrong, that what we have is better than what others have, and that we can fix what is broken here all by ourselves. Instead, let us invite God's spirit which is already here among us to wake us up, to enliven us even to the point of chaos, to give us a new hope and a new purpose, as we learn to live in the liminal, mysterious space of what might be and what could be, not just what already is.

It is Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the day when everything changed. May the winds of change blow among us now, as God creates in the outline of this church a new kind of community, where love is our vision and everyone has voice, in their own beautiful language.

AMEN