

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 28, 2023

## **Coming Together**

Acts 2:1-21

During this past week, I trust you were able to live out and live under the blessing that I spoke over you at the conclusion of last Sunday's service: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24-26). About three years ago, as COVID-19 was beginning to shut things down, that benediction was set to music in a piece called "The Blessing." It was introduced during a worship service at a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and quickly spread, becoming a chart-topping hit and viral sensation. In fact, more than 100 virtual choirs around the globe created their versions of the song. As one report summarized it,

Beyond the US and England, compilations have been made in Australia, Burma, Chile, Canada, France, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Romania, Spain, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. "The Arab World Blessing" features singers from 16 Arab-speaking countries in the Middle East, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and South Sudan.<sup>1</sup>

I'm not sure what songs the followers of Jesus were singing as they assembled in a room on the upper floor of a house in Jerusalem. It was the day of Pentecost, a Jewish religious celebration marking the giving of the Torah, as well as a time for dedicating the first fruits of the harvest. Faithful Jews from a range of nations had gathered in the holy city. It was an incredibly international assembly. God had brought together a multiethnic, multilingual congregation to hear news about what he had done to restore Israel and redeem the world.

Granted, it was a very low-tech event. There was no jumbotron showing the faces of the apostles as they preached. No speaker system providing quality sound to those in the back of the crowd. No stage lighting to enhance the worship atmosphere. Actually, God himself provided the special effects that propelled the disciples out of the house and into public space. A "sound like the blowing of a violent wind" (v. 2). "Tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them" (v. 3).

When it came to audiovisuals, the accent was on the audio. The most awesome aspect of the whole experience was that the disciples were empowered to speak a range of different languages not their own. And the people God had assembled were each able to hear the good news in their own dialect. At first, they pulled out their phones and opened up their favorite language translation apps, but soon realized they weren't necessary. Turns out the wonders of the Holy Spirit had surpassed even the wonders of technology.

As you might expect, responses to the church's witness were mixed. Some were amazed at both the message and the medium. Some were perplexed, and submitted follow up questions on social media. Others concluded that the whole thing was just bizarre, and chalked it up to inebriation among the disciples. They were filled more with spirits than with the Spirit. That's when Peter, clearly as sober as they come, stood up and preached a rousing sermon, explaining what was going on. His text was Joel 2, the prophetic promise

that one day God would bring deliverance and pour out his presence “on all people” (v. 17). That day, said Peter, has arrived. And thanks to the work of Spirit, about three thousand people responded to the altar call and made a commitment to follow Jesus.

Each of them received the Holy Spirit, in a deeply personal way, but not as if the Spirit were his or her private possession. The same Spirit of one God had come upon each of them, just as the Spirit had come upon the company of the disciples while they were waiting prayerfully, together in their room. But this Spirit was no one’s individual property. The Spirit was given to the community. The Spirit marked them out as a people who belong to God, together. Indeed, one of the chief signs of the Spirit’s presence among them was their togetherness.

At each of our deacons meetings, we devote time to a training discussion, to help us grow and be more fully equipped for our ministry as leaders in the church. At our May meeting, the topic was togetherness. It generated some engaging conversation about some of the obstacles to togetherness in the life of a congregation, as well as some of the opportunities for deeper fellowship that come with opening our lives up to one another. In our discussion material, this particular statement stood out: “In conversion, we reinterpret our personal story in the light of the story of the Christian community ... Reinterpreting our story in this manner entails accepting the story of the Christian community as our own. We are now part of *this* people; we are incorporated into *this* community.”<sup>2</sup> That’s part of what’s going on in the story of Pentecost. Those who confess the crucified and risen Messiah as Lord are being incorporated into this community. They’re being converted into togetherness.

In our text, Luke takes us back to the source of the church’s togetherness, the Holy Spirit. The community of disciples isn’t held together by having every believer learn how to speak Aramaic with a Galilean dialect. Instead, each people group’s cultural identity, including its language, is preserved and at the same time transcended by being incorporated into this new community in Christ. Their equality and cohesion is grounded in having the same Spirit of the one God.

Author Philip Yancey says,

As I read accounts of the New Testament church, no characteristic stands out more sharply than [diversity]. Beginning with Pentecost, the Christian church dismantled the barriers of gender, race, and social class that had marked Jewish congregations....

One modern Indian pastor told me, “Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That’s the real miracle.”

Diversity complicates rather than simplifies life. Perhaps for this reason we tend to surround ourselves with people of similar age, economic class, and opinion. Church offers a place where infants and grandparents, unemployed and executives, immigrants and blue bloods can come together. Just yesterday I sat sandwiched between an elderly man hooked up to a puffing oxygen tank and a breastfeeding baby who grunted loudly and contentedly throughout the sermon. Where else can we find that mixture?

When I walk into a new church, the more its members resemble each other—and resemble me—the more uncomfortable I feel.<sup>3</sup>

That’s the kind of outlook, and the kind of togetherness, made possible by the miracle of Pentecost.

I attended a recent community meeting that included some of our county commissioners as well as a representative from the county health department. When a question was raised about ways that individuals and organizations, including folks from churches, can get more directly involved in promoting health equity in our county, one member of the panel emphasized participating in a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee that helps advise on these matters. That request was just one example of how diversity, equity, and inclusion are more than just buzzwords or short-term trends in our society. They actually reflect ongoing cultural movements aimed at creating more just and cohesive communities. Part of what that means is greater togetherness.

One of the ways that we as Christians, individually and as congregations, can engage with these issues and movements, is by promoting and practicing the togetherness that's generated by the Holy Spirit. Look again at the life of the earliest community of Jesus' followers. The life they were sharing was life in the Spirit. As one person has pointed out: "The united possession of the Holy Spirit explains the 'togetherness' which the Church experienced, the willingness to have all things in common, and the bond of fellowship which marked their gathering. They could not be other than one in the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

So yes, following Jesus means that we need to be engaged and involved on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but with a distinctively Christianly emphasis on how the power for the transformation and cohesion we seek is power from beyond us, the power of God's reconciling, redeeming love. The power of Jesus' presence. The power of the Holy Spirit.

One leader in the Pentecostal tradition tells of a meeting that his parents attended in the 1960s. He says:

..., it was a hopeful gathering of uncertain outcome. Jack and Mary, my father and mother, white, blue-collar, northern Alabama Pentecostals, were gathering with black Christians to pray concerning the impending integration of schools in the 1960s. In a town with more guns than people and a Klan membership of over 400, there was ample cause for concern. According to the local white citizens' council, my parents were traitors to their race; but, according to Mr. White, the black principal, they were concerned Christian parents gathering with other parents to ask God for power to give a faithful witness. The prayer meeting itself was the beginning of their spiritual-political witness. As the Spirit descended upon them, prayers in English (Southern English!), "tongues," and "sighs too deep for words" were offered. Unlike in many other places, integration in this town occurred without violent incident. It was eerie and wonderful, as I now recall it.<sup>5</sup>

As Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, he quoted the prophet Joel. "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (v. 17). There is a kingdom of righteousness, joy, and peace coming, through Jesus Christ. But even now, because of his life, death, and resurrection, we already have life in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit who comes to us. The Holy Spirit whose coming creates a coming together of those who call upon the name of the Lord for salvation. Remember that our togetherness as a congregation, and our togetherness with the larger church, are created by the power of God to be an advance sign of, and a witness to, the togetherness that our society and the world long for and seek after. "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place" (v. 1). To the extent that we in this fellowship reflect and embody the outreaching, ingathering grace of God, this church itself continues to be a Pentecost miracle.

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Fowler, "The Blessing' Sung Around the World: 100 Virtual Choirs Spread Worship Anthem." Christianity Today. July 29, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/july/blessing-song-virtual-choir-kari-jobe-pittsburgh-uk.html> (May 24, 2023).

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Grenz, quoted in Tony Wolfe, *Deacon Magazine* (Spring 2023) 38.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, "Denominational Diagnostics." *Christianity Today* (November 2008) 119.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn W. Barker, "The Church and the Holy Spirit." *Christianity Today*. January 4, 1960.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1960/january-4/church-and-holy-spirit.html> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Land, "The Whole Church Is Pentecostal!" *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 2004) 30.