

Pentecost's Affirmation

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1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. ¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

From the Acts of the Apostles 2:1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b] ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” ¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ ““In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹ And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Imagine, you've been traveling for weeks, by camel or donkey or foot, for a religious holiday, the festival of weeks, where you bring your first fruits to offer before God. You're covered in the grime of travel, and while you might speak the language, it isn't your mother tongue. Every thought, every statement takes a little bit longer and is just a bit exhausting, speaking in another language. You've grown tired of asking people to speak slower so you can understand them, so sometimes, you miss half the conversation.

Then suddenly, you hear, like a beacon to your ear, your own language, in your own accent even, and unexpectedly it feels like home. It feels like safety. It feels like ease. You follow your ear to the voice to greet your countryperson only to find a local speaking your language perfectly, telling you about something wondrous, mystical, brand new, and yet, ancient.

This story would've been the experience of the foreigners on that first Pentecost day. There were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, people from Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans, and Arabs – all hearing in their own languages about the great deeds of God through Jesus.

Every time we open the bible we are stepping in to a complex and beautiful drama, like Lord of the Rings or Game of Thrones to the thousandth degree, an epic story told over centuries with motifs and themes and patterns that we can miss if we disregard the rest of the story. Pentecost is one such story, where we can glean so much if we know a bit about the background.

Pentecost occurs during the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, one of three pilgrimage festivals where first-century Jews who were able would travel to Jerusalem to mark the beginning of the wheat harvest and celebrate the giving of the Torah from God to Moses at Mount Sinai¹. God met Moses at Mount Sinai. Centuries before Jesus, God came to Moses in smoke, thunder, flame, and the sound of a horn, 50 days after the Exodus. Pentecost.

¹ Exodus 19:16-20

It shouldn't surprise any of us then that the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the *ruah* - *the breath* of God, arrives during this celebration. A fierce sound comes down from heaven like the howling of the wind, filling the house where Jesus' followers were sitting together, likely around 120 people, men and women, enslaved and free, rich and poor. Then they see flames above one another's heads – each one like a mini Mount Sinai, now themselves places where God dwells. Rather than in a mountain, tabernacle or temple, the people following Jesus suddenly become the home of God's Holy Spirit presence.

So there you are, a first-century Jew from far away from Jerusalem, at your holy city for a pilgrimage festival. And you hear your mother tongue drawing you in. Around you, you listen to others jeering the Jesus-followers, laughing at them, saying they're drunk. Then up gets this one scruffy guy who starts speaking, saying the people speaking your language aren't drunk. He then starts quoting the radically egalitarian words of the prophet Joel, saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams. Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."²

In a reversal of the tower of Babel, rather than being confused, you suddenly understand.

Theologian Stephanie M. Crumpton writes, "we celebrate Pentecost as a barrier-breaking moment when God spoke to, through, and in whatever language was necessary to communicate the good news. Peter invites us to think about what it means for the Holy Spirit to come into our own lives so that we too can be empowered to carry news of God's deeds in a way that makes the good news accessible in relevant and tangible ways."³

Crumpton continues, "When the Holy Spirit sets the disciples in motion with multiple languages, diversity is affirmed as a primary tool through which God's

² Joel 2:28-29

³ Stephanie M. Crumpton, "Day of Pentecost: Acts 2:1-21" in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

love is expressed."⁴ Diversity is a primary tool through which God expresses love. Diversity.

So often, I see diversity as something to be gotten through so we all can just come to some kind of compromise. When I'm honest with myself, I sometimes feel that diversity causes havoc, disruption, delay, and confusion. It interferes with my desire to get things done, to be productive or efficient. But God, instead of being obsessed with efficiency or simplicity, chooses diversity. God doesn't select the binary of included versus excluded; God chooses infinite difference.

Perhaps the strident views in our communities come from the fact that we have distanced ourselves from difference rather than sought it out. Whose is the voice you cannot listen to? Who is the person you cannot imagine as an expression of God's face? It is almost as though through Pentecost, God is telling us that that person's language matters, that they matter. At Pentecost, the Spirit's coming announces a new communal order that reflects "egalitarianism rather than hierarchy, diversity rather than homogeneity"⁵, for the Spirit, is poured out on *all* people.

What if instead of viewing diversity as something to tolerate, something to survive, what if we saw diversity as a gift of God, a primary way God shows us love? What if diversity leads us to new ways to be Christ in the world?

In nature, biodiversity in ecosystems, species, and individuals leads to greater stability. Species with high genetic diversity are adaptable to a wide variety of conditions and are more likely to be able to weather disturbances, disease, and climate change.

What if we, like nature, were created to thrive in diversity rather than sameness? So often we sequester ourselves off into corners, so we don't have to relate to those with whom we disagree. We separate into our silos of agreement and trash talk the folks who don't agree with us.

So often when businesses or organizations do Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work, they think of it as a chore to complete before they get back to whatever the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

real work is. What if, instead, the real work *is* the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion? What if that *was the work* that led to the flourishing of the organization, the business, the human community? It's as if through Pentecost, with all the voices in numerous languages, God clues us in yet again to the fact that it is through leaning into difference that we come closest to the very Spirit of God.

In our first reading from Corinthians, Paul is speaking to a community competing and arguing with one another about whose spiritual gifts are the most important, the most special. And rather than giving a definitive answer on which gift is the greatest, Paul frustrates his readers' expectations by saying that, in fact, each gift matters.

The Common English Bible translates it, "there are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit, there are different ministries and the same lord, different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good."⁶

So, there are different languages, denominations, understandings of God, skin colors, nationalities, sexualities, gender identities, different everything. And God gives a demonstration of the Spirit to *each person* for the common good. Our task as followers of this Pentecostal Holy Spirit is to seek out that demonstration of the Spirit in all those we meet, perhaps especially those who are different from us.

Like pretty much all of us, I grew up in a homophobic culture and household. I went to a Christian elementary school. I grew up thinking there was no way *I* could be attracted to women, not as a Christian. Christians were purely heterosexual, as God had ordained it.

Then in my teen years, I was surrounded by youth ministry. My Dad was my youth pastor, my brother was my youth director, and the man who would become my brother-in-law was also on the youth staff. I was well-versed in the language of youth ministry from a young age. But then, I went to an arts high school. Unsurprisingly, I met a significantly more diverse population there than at my church. In school I met gay people, and my thinking about homosexuality got a bit more complicated. I thought then that being gay was, while not antithetical to

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Common English Bible

Christianity, just a bit outside the lines. I thought it was fine. I thought God probably didn't care and just wanted everyone to love everyone.

Then, a decade later, I went to seminary. On my first day, I met Meredith, and we became fast friends, with them inviting me to sing a 90s mashup song they wrote at an open mic night. We sang together (they're an incredible musician), hung out, and took classes together. We both were interested in youth ministry and wanted to work with teenagers after graduation. Meredith spoke youth ministry.

One night, after we'd been friends for about a month, Meredith came out to me, telling me they were a lesbian and had a girlfriend. I had a huge smile, thanking Meredith for telling me. I gave them a hug and a high five and said I couldn't wait to meet their girlfriend.

But internally, I was reeling. I thought to myself, "They make those?! LGBTQ+ people can go into youth ministry?" For some reason, before that moment, I thought it was unacceptable for queer folks to do youth ministry. It was just impossible. But then, there was Meredith, one of my closest friends, the youth ministry darling of Princeton Theological Seminary, and they were a lesbian. My whole world opened up and I suddenly had to completely rethink my sexuality and reexamine my life up to that point.

Before knowing Meredith, I had reached the conclusion that Christians could be members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I believed they should be fully welcomed and appreciated and had even voted for political candidates ensuring marriage equality, but I had ignored two decades of glaringly obvious signs that I might be a *part* of that community myself.

I needed someone to speak my language, to see someone in my language, to discover who God truly created me to be. I needed to meet Meredith to understand that all of me might be included in God's story, not just the parts that I thought were acceptable. Just like the Jewish foreigners there on Pentecost, I needed to hear, see, and understand something in my own language—for me, the language of youth ministry.

My friend Meredith changed my life. Through them, through their life, the Holy Spirit spoke to me of a God who is always more loving and more inclusive

than we expect. Meredith had no idea that night they came out to me that they were changing my life, for two years later, I would start dating and consequently marry a woman I met in seminary, my wife, Jenni.

If I had not encountered Meredith's diversity as a Christian queer person, I would never have understood, or it would've taken *much* longer, that I also belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

The affirmation of Pentecost is that you, yes you, in all of your specificity and uniqueness, are included, so much so that the Spirit will speak your language so that you might hear of God's deeds. And not only that, but God includes everyone, each person a member of the holy body that brings life out of death.

Father Gregory Boyle writes, "Human beings are settlers, but not in the pioneer sense. It is our human occupational hazard to settle for little. We settle for purity and piety when we are being invited to an exquisite holiness. We settle for the fear-driven when love longs to be our engine. We settle for a puny, vindictive God when we are being nudged always closer to this wildly inclusive, larger-than-any-life God. We allow our sense of God to atrophy. We settle for the illusion of separation when we are endlessly asked to enter into kinship with all."⁷

The affirmation of Pentecost is radical inclusion, including me, including you, including the people we have a hard time listening to or respecting, including the people who look different, sound different, love different, and live different. In the power of the Spirit, God calls us to view them as siblings in Christ, worthy of love and belonging.

So friends, may we hear god speaking to us in our own language, and when we look at one another, may we be ever reminded of Pentecost's affirmation of diversity as God's great gift of love.

Amen.

⁷ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).