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“BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION: Whose Party Is It Anyway?”

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“On the day of Pentecost all the Lord's followers were together in one place.”

–Acts 2:1 (CEV)

Well, today, you have *experienced*, more than heard, the Pentecost story in Acts. And that's entirely appropriate, since it was at least as much a sensory event for the disciples as it was a cognitive one! There were tongues - as of fire - divided over the disciples' heads — maybe divided in as many parts as the languages that were spoken. There was a wind described in such a way as to evoke stories we hear of tornadoes — the sound of a freight train coming right thru the room!

There are communities of faith, such as the St. John's Apostolic Mission Church near Cape Town, South Africa that expects such a baptism of the Holy Spirit every time they gather. As I said last week, if we believed and expected that experience, we'd be better off wearing crash helmets to worship than our Sunday finery.

But believers at St. John's Apostolic Mission Church do believe and do anticipate. They gather to worship four times a day, seven days a week, to pray for healing for their people.¹ They believe Jesus' promise that “God will send the Holy Spirit”; they know they cannot engineer the event; and so they meet and wait with expectancy. An observer says, “When it appears, individuals say things like, ‘I was not myself. I do not remember what I said or did when the Holy Spirit came upon me.’ Believers at St. John's . . . , like the believers in Galilee on the day of Pentecost, speak languages they do not know.”

And so the question is asked, “What does it mean when human beings fluently speak languages they do not know and that native speakers recognize? . . . It was absurd to hear eleven people from Galilee to speak the local languages of Asia Minor, Egypt, Libya, etc.” Visitors from all these places, immigrants, really,² were amazed to hear the Good News preached to them by ordinary Galileans – some were fisherfolk, most were probably illiterate . . . and now they could communicate the Good News to everyone!

Now this morning, I know that there were a few of you who understood the German, French, or Italian, but I doubt many understood Greek or Hebrew!! So our reading was only representative of that first Pentecost insofar as you could understand RobertJoe speaking English. The rest of us would have been speaking in tongues we'd never heard before . . . much like my reading Greek, frankly! . . . but we would have been understood by international visitors, immigrants, or – as the Bible names them – aliens who might be worshipping with us.

I know it is often said that the Pentecost experience reversed the confounding of languages at Babel, where God scattered the people who were getting too big for their britches and began to see themselves as gods – building up into the heavens and advancing their name and their technologies.

But if this had reversed the “Babble at Babel”, then at Pentecost, everyone would have suddenly spoken the same language. And that is not what happened.

In case you were hearing echoes of issues we have in the United States today, I think you're right - there are things to be learned in this account that have some relevance to our current society. Let me read you something by Michael Jenkins, professor of pastoral theology and academic dean at Austin Presbyterian

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seminary in Texas. Knowing his setting may add a perspective to what this Texas Presbyterian has to say:

“In the late 1990's, the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the historian and public intellectual, raised a concern about the looming Balkanization of American society. (Note, I had to look up balkanization, and it's a socio-political term for breaking up a larger body into small, mutually hostile units.) [Schlesinger feared] that tribal interests and ethnic identities . . . would unravel the fragile bonds of unity in culture. People of differing ethnicities, races, and languages crowded together onto the same small plot of real estate spelled trouble with a capital *T* for Schlesinger. He feared the kind of social disintegration that occurred in the former Yugoslavia and led to ethnic cleansing. ‘Unless a common purpose binds them together, tribal hostilities will drive them apart,’ he wrote.³

“In light of tensions around the world, Schlesinger's concerns must be taken seriously. In light of today's text, however, his concerns need not paralyze us in anxiety or restrain us from both taking seriously and celebrating the rich diversity of God's world.”

Jenkins continues later, “The perils of Balkanization are abundantly real, terrifyingly real: genocide, under the euphemism of ethnic cleansing, lurks under the mantle of religious and tribal purity; fanatic nationalism, under the misnomer of patriotism, lures even the most settled souls and devoted spirits of fellow citizens. And so people fear difference, otherness, the strangeness of the stranger. But the real threat of Balkanization lies not in the difference that God has woven into all parts of God's creation, including humanity. The great danger of Balkanization lies in any group's lust to power over others, its insistence that its identity alone reflects God's nature and God's way, its demand that the otherness of others be erased from the pages of history or from the face of the earth.”

Wow - you'd think this guy was predicting the changes in Texas textbooks or the new laws in Arizona! But this was written in 2009 . . . almost prophetic, in a way.

Now let me take you on a little side trip about “God's nature”, which our professor notes may be claimed by any single group.

When I was in seminary, about 20 years ago - WHEW! - I attended Colgate Rochester Divinity School, which was then a covenanted consortium of Episcopalians, the School of Black Church Studies, a Baptist missionary school, and a Roman Catholic seminary for training folk other than priests. In addition to the Episcopalians and the Black Church Studies folk, who led worship once each week, by covenant agreement, each other denomination led worship a number of times each semester, based on their percentage in the total enrollment. We Presbyterians led worship at least 2-4 times a year.

It came time for me to plan worship, and I had to keep in mind what some might consider tokenism . . . that we had to include in the leadership of every worship service folk of both genders, different ethnicities, and different denominations. In that way, we learned each other's traditions from the inside out. But mostly, we found it an annoying requirement that made worship planning so much more difficult.

In addition, we were of course encouraged to be creative in our use of the arts. We Presbys were lucky – one of our own had been a florist, so we always had a striking arrangement of flowers or native woods on the communion table, usually related to the sermon theme. And, of course, I was expected to do something musical – but that was too easy, too predictable! So I chose to have the entire worship leadership team read the Psalm for the day as a choral reading.

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Actually, I'd like to have our previous readers come back up and demonstrate this for us. . . . (invite, distribute Psalm 15, instructions, etc.) Now the Psalm they're reading poses a question to God, and then it is answered — presumably by God. (Psalm 15)

(Please stay.) Now, I don't know what you experienced, but when I did this the first time, I looked over at the group as they spoke. There were friends and people I didn't know. There were men and women. There were black and brown and white faces. And there were Baptists and Lutherans, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. And I experienced one of those Holy Spirit moments, when I felt as if I had, for the first time, heard the voice of God . . . the voice of God in all its richness and complexity.

I'd like our group to do one more thing. Please read only verses 1 and 6 - the question and the summary answer, just as they are marked. And I invite you in the pews to either focus loosely on their faces or close your eyes and focus on their voices. (15:1,6)

Thank you. (Be seated.)

Professor Jinkins says that one danger of Balkanization lies in any group's insistence that their identity alone reflects God's nature. But “the image of God is not something that adheres to the singular individual” or to any one group.⁴ I may be jumping ahead a week to Trinity Sunday, but let's think about this . . . we worship a triune Godhead, God the Father, Son, and Spirit – or God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. G.K. Chesterton observed that “When we say God the Trinity, we are saying that God is in God's own being a ‘Holy Family’”.⁵

We live imprinted with the image of God, the image of the Trinity, an eternal and living community united in love. And so we ourselves are created for community and never fully live into God's image until we live in communion. And that communion “assumes difference—not uniformity—not conformity to a single idealized form of life, or nationality, or ethnicity, or tribe.

God's Spirit blew through the house in Galilee, the Spirit whose “fiery love created a community where only strangers stood before.” And no one was excluded.

“ In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon **all** flesh . . .
Then **everyone** who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

And the Holy Spirit is continuously adding to the church created by an awesome, powerful, colorful, unbridled, fiery, loving God!

Endnotes

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1. Much of the specifics of this sermon come from *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, pp. 14-19.
 2. *Ibid.*, Margaret Aymer, New Testament Studies, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.
 3. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on Multicultural Society* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 10 - as quoted by Michael Jinkins (*ibid.*, p. 14).
 4. Michael Jinkins (*Ibid.*, p. 18).
 5. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), 262 - as quoted by Jinkins (*ibid.*)