

ALL TOGETHER, NOW!

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June 9, 2019; Day of Pentecost, Year C

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”
— Acts 2:1

Yesterday I went out and bought an anniversary card for my dear wife. Claire and I were married 39 years ago on June 8, so I was there in the nick of time.

I had the usual experience, standing in front of the greeting-card display: I had to seek out just the right section, the one labeled “Anniversary — Wife.” To get there, I had to walk by the birthday cards, the graduation cards, the wedding cards, the sympathy cards, the thank-you cards, the Father’s Day cards (which is next Sunday, by the way). I even passed by the mysterious section they call “Just Because.”

I’ll tell you what sort of card I didn’t see. I didn’t see a single Pentecost card.

Not a blessed one!

Pentecost is the third-biggest holiday in the Christian year, behind Christmas and Easter. At certain times of the year, the greeting-card section will be chock full of cards for those holidays.

We all know how, with Christmas and Easter, secular culture has embraced the religious feast, manufacturing its own cheap knock-offs. There's secular Christmas, with its blatant consumerism and vague ethic of do-something-nice-for-someone-you-already-love. Then there's secular Easter, the rite of Spring.

You'll have no problem finding decorations and greeting cards for those secular holidays. Many of them feature their own mascots: Santa and the Easter Bunny. Those two have pretty high name-recognition, even among people who've never darkened a church door.

What sort of mascot would you suggest for Pentecost, to go toe-to-toe with Santa and the Easter Bunny? The Holy-Spirit dove? Somehow I don't think the bird's in the same league.

What about a special holiday candy? On Christmas you've got candy canes. On Easter, chocolate bunnies. On Pentecost, there are no worries whatsoever about sticking to your diet!

I don't think we in the church will ever feel the need to remind one another to "Keep the Holy Spirit in Pentecost." Nobody, but nobody is trying to hijack this holiday. Pentecost is ours alone.

I don't think I could count all the times I've preached on this familiar Pentecost story from the second chapter of Acts. Over the years, I've zeroed in on various aspects of it....

- the significance of the Holy Spirit as wind — that essential breath that seems to be the very life-force itself...
- the Holy Spirit as fire, the source of warmth and light — but more than that, a vital force whose very nature is to consume and transform...
- the strange detail of how, miraculously, the disciples are briefly given the gift of comprehending other languages — God breaking down the barriers between nations and cultures...
- the scorn sometimes heaped on those who encounter the living God, who are all too often dismissed by those who say of them: “They are filled with new wine!”
- Most of all there's the way the Holy Spirit “lights a fire” under the disciples, in more ways than one: how there was a unique mix of combustible materials in Jerusalem that day, that caused the church to fairly explode into the heart of the Roman Empire: eventually burning its way into the very palace of the Caesars.

The second chapter of Acts is a rich, rich passage for preaching and teaching, sure enough. It's one of those texts that bears repeated reading, and deep reflection.

Coming at it again this year, I'd like to focus on a line from the story that doesn't get much attention. This is because it seems so unexceptional, so ordinary. It's the very first verse: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”

Right at the beginning, there's a word that calls out for a little unpacking. It's the word "Pentecost" itself. Now, when we think of the word today, we tend to assume it's a Christian holiday — which, of course, it is. But Pentecost is more than that.

As Luke writes, "When the day of Pentecost had come," he's not actually talking about Christianity. Pentecost is, first and foremost, a Jewish observance, known in Hebrew as *Shavuot*. Literally, *Shavuot* means "weeks": so, the English name for it is "the Feast of Weeks."

Pentecost is the Jewish holiday's *Greek* name. Literally it means "fifty days." Because Shavuot is celebrated seven weeks after the second day of Passover, it ends up being fifty days after the first day of Passover. It's a celebration of the first wheat harvest — which, in the warmer climate of the Middle East, occurs around this time of year

Now, I realize that may be a whole lot more calendar trivia than you were expecting today, but I mention it for one reason: it explains why Jesus' disciples are gathered together that day. They're celebrating a Jewish festival. What happens on that occasion is new and surprising, as the Holy Spirit gives birth to the church of Jesus Christ. Yet, we should never forget that the church doesn't just pop into

existence on Pentecost. God doesn't create it out of nothing. The very word "Pentecost" shows that the church grows out of the fertile soil of Judaism.

Yet, that's not what really strikes me about that first verse. What really strikes me is the line: "They were all together in one place."

They didn't have to be, you know. Sure, they'd all been together when Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup. But once he was arrested, they scattered. Except for a few courageous women, each of them went into hiding.

But that didn't last long. After he was crucified, they found their way back to one another.

How do we know that? Because of what it says in John's Gospel. When Mary Magdalene runs back to tell the other disciples the glorious news of resurrection, there's no mention of her searching them out in separate houses. No, they seem to be mourning their Master's death together, supporting one another through their bereavement — which, of course, turns to joy when they learn that he lives!

Now — fifty days later — with Jesus' resurrection and ascension but a memory, the disciples are still together in one place. Their state of mind has got to be 100% more positive, now. Jesus' ascension into heaven would surely have seemed a dramatic capstone to his life and ministry.

You'd think at least a few of them would have treated it like a high-school or college graduation. You know how it goes, on those occasions: how you sign each other's yearbook, vowing undying friendship. You pass around those miniature senior pictures, certain you'll carry each of them in your purse or wallet forever. You embrace one another, there on the football field (or in the gym, if the weather's lousy), saying yes, we've got to get together over the summer, let's do it. Yet — as every graduate inevitably discovers — you quickly lose track of all but a handful of those people. Up till now, their lives have described, for you, the latitude and longitude of your world. And, you for them. But, no longer: because new adventures await!

What more dramatic a rite of passage could there be, than a man being lifted up into the clouds? No one could have faulted the disciples for turning around and going home, as soon as they beheld *that* miracle — for what more could God possibly have in store for them? It was like the silence following the grand finale of a fireworks display. Nobody sits around on the lawn chairs after the last booming percussion shell explodes: staring up into the night sky, hoping for more. What could there possibly be to do, in that moment, except fold the chairs and go home?

Yet, that is most certainly *not* what the disciples do! “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Why?

Maybe it has something to do with the Great Commission Jesus has given them. In Matthew’s Gospel it begins like this: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” It’s impossible to discern this in English, but in the original Greek, the verb “make disciples” is clearly plural. Jesus isn’t commanding each one of them to go out every which way, helter-skelter, and individually witness to the good news. No, he’s commanding them to come together, and as one body devise a strategy for sharing the gospel. “Go, make me more disciples,” Jesus says. “Do it together!”

There could be another reason, still. It’s very possible they don’t comprehend exactly *how* they’re going to fulfill this Great Commission of their Lord. Making disciples is easier said than done. As complicated as people are, as resistant as they can be to change, as limited as the disciples surely regard themselves to be — due to poor education, limited experience, or whatever — they may be simply sitting around, waiting for some further direction.

If they’re like most groups who’ve lost the daily guidance of a leader, they’re spending an awful lot of time talking and discussing and disagreeing with one another, as they look for a common mind to arise among them. Knowing what we do know, from the Gospels, about how everlastingly stubborn those disciples

could be, it would be no wonder if they spent hour after hour wrestling with the question, coming to no resolution.

In the past, they would have looked to their Lord and Master to resolve the dispute: to ask them a pointed question, to tell them a parable — or simply declare to them the correct interpretation. Yet, now that Jesus no longer walks among them, what are they to do?

The wonder is that Jesus himself *does* intervene to answer their questions. The Holy Spirit is the living Spirit of Christ, active in the world — and so, on Pentecost, the one who said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” proves he truly means what he said.

It’s not exactly the answer they expected. It’s not an answer rendered in words, nor even one that lends itself to easy retelling later. The Pentecost miracle is a massive dose of pure spiritual experience: a drawing-near of the holy. The powerful spiritual kick is something those disciples will remember all their days.

I get the sense, reading this biblical account, that even a team of the most gifted investigative journalists — had there been such people the scene — could have wrapped the Pentecost experience up in a neat little verbal package. The takeaway is not so much whatever lesson the disciples learned from the experience, but how the experience transformed *them*. The true content of the Pentecost experience is the disciples themselves — not those men and women as they went

into that room, but as they came out of it: on fire for the gospel, equipped to travel to the ends of the earth!

Let's be very clear that the content of Pentecost is not the individual disciples, but those believers gathered *together*, as a group. Except for Peter — who goes out, afterwards, and gives a sermon — there's no mention of any individual names in this first portion of Acts. The Christmas story has Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. The Easter story offers Mary Magdalene, and Peter, and Thomas, and several others who all have starring roles. But Pentecost's not like that. The gathered company of the faithful is just that: a company. A group. A collective.

And that's not something our individualistic culture is likely to be happy with. Maybe that's the reason why there are no Pentecost greeting cards, and why no one's ever developed a secular clone of this religious holiday. We Americans have a hard time celebrating anything we can't do alone, on our own, as individuals.

Not that some of us haven't tried. There are certain Christians who have so taken to heart the evangelistic message about the importance of a personal relationship with Christ that they sort of forget about the other relationships the

Holy Spirit clearly means them to have: relationships with one another, in and through the church!

This message of purely individual salvation, I'm afraid, has permeated our culture rather deeply. It's resulted in people proudly making statements like, "I can worship God just as well on the golf course — or hiking a woodland trail, or watching the sunrise on the beach — as I can in church."

I'm sorry, but no you can't. And there's a very simple reason. Worship, by definition, is not an individual sport. Maybe you can pray to God on a golf course — you can pray to God anywhere! But you can't *worship* there — unless you bring a whole lot of other people along with you (and I'm not talking about the golf foursome). Worship is something only the whole people of God can do together. It's the singing of hymns that join individual voices in a powerful chorus of praise. It's the experience of public prayer, as petitions and intercessions are lovingly gathered up and joined together in a common voice. It's the passing of communion bread and wine from one person to another. It's a whole community making covenant, along with the parents of a child being baptized, to embody the truth of that old saying, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Our culture needs this common experience of worship now more than ever! We're so fragmented as a people: living in our own individual silos in so many

ways. So often our electronic devices only accentuate the aloneness. Social media provides an illusion of connection to a great many other people, but most of those connections are so very shallow.

If there's one thing the church of Jesus Christ continues to offer to a lonely world, it's this experience of being "all together in one place."

That connectedness happens, in a very visible way, in the formal gathering for worship. But it also happens in the multitude of opportunities for service and fellowship that foster Christian community.

As those disciples learned on that first Christian Pentecost, wherever two or three (or more) are gathered in Christ's name, there he is in our midst.

It's a wonder. It's a miracle. And it's an experience you or I or anyone else can have, if together, in community, we practice a truly Pentecostal faith!

Let us pray:

**You have called us, Lord.
But you have not called us in the isolation
of our private thoughts and imaginings.
You have called us together, in community.
Strengthen the bonds of fellowship among us.
Tune our ears to hear our common voice of praise.
Send your Spirit this day,
to bring us together
and to send us out in common mission.
In the name of Jesus, Amen.**