

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God. *Ephesians 2:19*

Gathering of the Saints

I had the best time yesterday, at the 50th Anniversary of Korean Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in Rowland Heights!

Some of you may remember the wonderful ministry of Korean Good Shepherd, starting out in Monterey Park and, with the closure of the original English-speaking church and a stroke of genius on the part of the Presbytery 30 years ago, their move to Rowland Heights. Back then, Synod Executive and Stated Clerk Mark Hong was an associate pastor—his first call as a PC(USA) pastor. Some of you may remember Dr. Eui Young Yu, lead elder of the church and a brilliant sociologist who was on the forefront of studying and teaching about the Korean-American diaspora. And sadly, some of you remember the great pains we all went through with a dismissal attempt that went horribly, horribly wrong. The process took years, and took so much out of the church that they have not recovered since. But they do still have their very large campus, and have opened their doors to two partner churches, and all three churches gathered to celebrate together this anniversary. In order to do this, Pastor John Moon did an amazing job organizing the three churches, and with the help of technology, all could worship together, whether they spoke Korean, English, Chinese, or Spanish! Yes, it was a quadrilingual worship service, but the gathered body spoke, and felt, with one common word: Hallelujah! It was yet one more time that God surprised us with unexpected blessings, and offers us a twist on our original vision for Korean Good Shepherd, that of a pan-Asian-American church that speaks English. While English is the closest thing they have to a common language, the ministry partners have retained their languages, making it a real Pentecost church, empowered by the ability to speak all the languages of the peoples of their communities.

As different as the groups are, they had two things in common: they are all immigrant churches, and they are dedicated to Jesus Christ. Though they have very different backgrounds, I expect they all have experienced some of the disruption that happens when they arrived in this very strange and not-always-welcoming nation. If nothing else, they have all had to deal with language, and being seen as “stranger” or “foreigner.” But gathered together, all contributing and taking turns leading in worship, they were mighty in number and spirit, reflecting our own Pentecost experience at 1816 Desire Ave.

Last week, I wrote about how each of us can be seen as a “cog in the wheel.” One thing I didn’t mention is that when I thought about that saying, I looked it up to see exactly what a “cog” is. While small and on its own without value, a cog is essential to the machine that depends on the turning of wheels or gears to operate. One of the countless things we learned from COVID times was the way we dismiss the value of persons who are in fact essential to our lives, but in unglamorous ways.

We are living in a time when too many people are seen as unimportant, or even a drain on the nation’s resources, because they were born outside the United States—or they are assumed to be. I just saw an article about Rami Othmane, a man who is legally awaiting processing on his green card application but was arrested and is being held in the basement of the Metropolitan Detention Center in downtown LA. That was over two weeks ago. Rami happens to be married to Utah-born Dr. Wafaa Alrashid, who is Huntington Hospital’s Chief of Medical Staff, leading more than 1,000 physicians in its system. That means that instead of focusing her attention on all of us who look to Huntington for medical care, at least some of Dr. Alrashid’s energy is spent standing outside the downtown jail, trying to get her husband home.

We tend to think of the immigrants in our midst as poor, uneducated laborers who contribute quietly to our livelihood. Many folks who never thought much about immigration are rallying in defense of folks who have always been with us—gardeners, handymen, taco truck vendors, farmworkers—people who enable us to live our lives in comfort. What would happen if all the immigrants in the US organized for action?

As I looked at this joyous crowd of Korean, Latino, and Chinese Christians, I thought of the power we have in numbers. Even if we are small as individuals, even if any one of us lacks the skills or resources to make something big happen, if we gather together, and coordinate the gifts God has granted us to further Christ's mission, we can do "even greater things than these," as Jesus promised.

May we continue to reach out to other people of faith, even folks very different from us, with confidence that God's provision often comes through God's people. May we recognize the power we have when we gather as one, and act as one body of Christ, for the transformation of our community and nation. May we appreciate the different gifts and perspectives we all bring to Christ's mission, even as we celebrate our oneness in Christ. May we always look to raise our voices as one, as we say Hallelujah!

We will have another opportunity to glimpse God's kin-dom this Saturday, as we celebrate the return of Sibana'gna to our Gabrieleno-Tongva siblings. Even in these desert times of fear and anger, we have the living water to give to people desperate for hope. Together, we can be agents of justice, bearers of love . . . a gathering of the saints.

Thanks be to God!

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