

All together in one place

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The Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Acts 2:1-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to 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. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For 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. For 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. 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." John 20:19-23

How we hear and make sense of and respond to Scripture is always conditioned by our own culture and time, our own place in the world – real or imagined – our own experiences, and our own historical moment and circumstances. With this in mind, I wonder how many of you heard, and how you heard, the very first verse that we heard this morning in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles: “*When the Day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place.*”

They were all together in one place. So poignant, in part because you and I have been unable to be *together in one place* for ten weeks now. And *How long, O Lord, until we will gather again in one place?* “*When the Day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place.*”

I don't believe that this feature of this scene is merely a narrative prop. Being “... *all together in one place*” seems intrinsic to the story, What if being all together in one place was, in fact, a precondition for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Notice also how the theme builds throughout the scene. Devout Jews from every known nation are soon introduced. And at the mighty sound of the Spirit's descent, the crowd gathered – *came together in one place*. Then they were bewildered, because each and every one of them was able to clearly hear, in their own native languages, the same divinely inspired message conveyed by the Spirit.

The disciples who are mentioned at the start of this Pentecost story were also in one place, although a very different place, in today's gospel scene. When we're told, only a few verses after today's text, that Thomas was absent on that prior occasion, the author amplifies the sense that they were, otherwise, all together in one place. But what united them there, only a few days after the betrayal, death and burial of Jesus, was fear. "... *the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.*"

Consider with me now how far they have come in 50 days. They had been locked inside some confined space by fear, after which Jesus repeatedly appeared to them, proved his resurrection, and broke bread with them. The author of both Luke and Acts introduces the final resurrection appearance by writing "...*when they had come together ...*" And from there Jesus ascends. Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem ... [and] *went to the room upstairs where they were staying ... All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*"

All of this reinforces my own wondering about coming together in one place as a critical pre-condition of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Some of you, like me, may have experienced that rush of a mighty wind of the Spirit when coming together in unity for good and holy purposes with others who know and follow Christ.

Sadly, tragically, it's also true that there is no inherent good in merely coming together, and coming together for malicious intent can have devastating outcomes. Over and over again in recent months, we've been cautioned to avoid coming together; we've seen the viral and lethal consequences of some who have come too closely together in one place.

And now, all over our nation, persons are coming together in ways that are crying out for holy justice and also in other ways that are destructive, violent and divisive. Most of us, I gather, recognize that the widespread protests of the past few days are only partly in response to the death of George Floyd. These protests and clashes are also, or perhaps even more so, symptomatic of the sad reality that we as a nation and culture are so very far from being all together in one place. We have become increasingly infected by fear and by ideologies of 'us' that discourage us from finding any common ground with 'them.' We are increasingly unwilling and unable to 'come together in one place.'

As I prepared for this morning, I was led to contemplate, with both gratitude and sorrow, the first words of our nation's Constitution. I'm sure that we all know the first word: We. "*We the people ...*" "*We the people of the United States ...*" And: Why are we writing this? "*...in Order to form a more perfect Union ...*" and also "*in Order ... to establish Justice ...*" and also "*in Order ... to ensure domestic Tranquility ...*" and also "*in Order ... to provide for the common defense ...*" that is, for the safety and protection of all, and also "*in Order ... to promote the general Welfare,*" that is, to provide reasonable equal opportunity and reasonable, fair, equal treatment for all under the law, and also "*in Order ... to secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and to our Posterity ...*"

Arguably, We Americans have never come close to that vision. Arguably, and alarmingly, we may be further from 'We the people' than at any time in our common life since the Civil War.

Yesterday I was talking by phone with Father Alonzo Pruitt about unrelated matters, but I ended the call by asking, "So, Fr. Pruitt, *what's the message of Pentecost for us at this time?*"

Without hesitation he said, “*Fire. Fire burns. And fire purities.*” Indeed. If so, let us not think now of the fires that have been set here in the streets of Chicago and elsewhere in our country in recent days that have been malicious and divisive. But do let us wonder about the fire of the Holy Spirit, and about what in us is in need of purification, repentance, renewal of purpose, justice or love, so that we might be restored to, or perhaps even to actively seek, a new and more profound understanding of, we.

Some of you may judge that I am mixing up civics and religion, church and state. But the same coming together described in the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost is repeatedly urged on all Christians throughout the New Testament. Maybe you heard St. Paul’s explanation in today’s second reading about why you and I are blessed with the gifts of the Spirit: “*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” The Ephesians are exhorted to “*make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Ephesians 4:1 The Philippians are urged to “*stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.*” Philippians 1:27

Even if only in some small way that may now seem insignificant amidst such grave turmoil, I wonder what step or steps you or I will take to move away from *us versus them* and toward *we*. How might the miraculous, powerful and unexpected outpouring and unity of the Holy Spirit be recreated and shown in *us* when we actively seek in faith to *come together in one place. Amen.*