



Pentecost

9 June 2019

Dr Howard F Perry

Acts 2:1-21, Romans 8:14-17, John 14:8-17

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St. Catherines

When I got the rota from Kara and saw that I was down to preach on Pentecost, I was delighted. Pentecost is one of my favorite feast days. I like the occasion. I like the texts. I like the music. It is also one of my pupils' – and colleagues' (!) – favorites because in Germany it gives them two weeks of vacation every year. I appreciate the time off as well, but for me it is a little bit more.

I

Joy

For us this morning, it is a happy occasion. On this day, we celebrate the birth of the church, this marvelous collection of individuals joined by their common faith in Jesus Christ.

For the disciples it marked the end of a period of uncertainty. Jesus had ascended to heaven and the disciples were left waiting for the Holy Spirit Jesus has promised to send them.

We can recognize some of their joy – and relief – that she has finally arrived in Peter's dry humor when addressing the crowd gathered by the noise and confused by hearing all sorts of languages: *[T]hese [men] are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.* (2:15)

Pentecost is an occasion of joy. There are somber feast days in the liturgical year, but this is definitely not one of them.

II

Vision – Promise – Challenge

Pentecost is also not a nostalgic feast day that looks back to a glorious past, to try to relive it. At least that is not the way I understand it. Rather, Pentecost is a vision. It shows not what we are, but what we should be – and what we can be, if we rely on the Holy Spirit and let her move us. In that sense, Pentecost is more than a vision. It is a promise – promise that is also a challenge!

In Acts the *hearers from every nation under heaven [are] bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.* (2:5-6) We can understand the native languages of which Luke, the author of Acts speaks, as a metaphor. What happens in Jerusalem is the challenge everyone faces who tries to explain his or her faith. It is a challenge that preachers especially face when they sit down to prepare a sermon: How do I speak so that my hearers understand me?

Even if we all speak the same language, English in our case, we immediately hear that English is not just English. I do not speak as Kara does, nor Solomon or Kingston. We all speak English, but our native languages are different. Our English, in other words, our way of understanding and thinking in the medium of this particular language, is formed by where

we learned it, where we grew up. It gets even more complicated when – as this morning – the children are listening, too.

How do we deal with this diversity? That is the challenge the world poses. It is no different today than it was 2000 years ago. I can't tell you how to deal with this diversity personally. However, I can assure you that we as a church can and shall deal with it. This is the promise of Pentecost. Pentecost promises us that with the Spirit's help we can deal with it!

Moreover, with the Spirit's help, we can not only deal with diversity. We can embrace it. We can celebrate it as a blessing.

This means we are swimming against the current, of course. Diversity, acceptance of differences is not "in". At least among a loud group of people. The populists reaching from the AfD in Germany to the League in Italy, the Brexit party in England and hard-core Trumpists in the US, just to name a few, reject this.

In a sense they are rejecting the Holy Spirit her-self – and thus God.

III

Inclusion – Openness

When we celebrate Pentecost, we celebrate diversity, we celebrate the role-shattering power of the Holy Spirit that Paul riffs in Galatians 3:28: There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Pentecost is a celebration of inclusiveness.

When we at St. Catherine's celebrate Pentecost this morning, we are also celebrating ourselves. Look around you. Whom do you see? What do you see?

Let me tell you what I see: Different nationalities. Different ethnic groups. Different lifestyles and sexual orientations. Different ages. Different theologies. Different ways of living our common faith. And what I have listed here is just a start!

A basic element of Pentecost is that we have a common faith, a faith we affirm every week in one of the creeds. However, a common faith does not mean that we agree on everything! When we begin to reduce faith to agreeing on things – like doctrine, theological or ethical positions – we have begun to misunderstand what faith is, what faith means.

Faith means trust. It is active. It is something we do. It is something we live. It describes our relationship to Jesus Christ, to the Ground of our, indeed of all, Being. And it reveals itself in how we relate to one another – especially to those who are not exactly like us. Those of other nationalities, of other ethnic groups, of other lifestyles and sexual orientations, of other ages, of other theologies. Even those of a different political persuasion and of another faith.

The demand for uniformity, be it uniformity in what we think or how we live, is a sign of a lack of faith.

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Pentecost is inclusive!! It reveals the unrealistic, practically inconceivable openness of God's love for all of God's creation – and it invites us actively to participate in it. And this is something that we really should rejoice about.

Let me close with a personal confession: I experience Pentecost every time that I come to St. Catherine's. From the very beginning I have seen and experienced an open, loving, accepting, diverse, some-times quarrelling community of faith unique among all the parishes I have experienced. That is what got me hooked. That is why I am still here.

On this Day of Pentecost in the Year of our Lord 2019, I want to ask you to share the joy, see the vision, accept the challenge and experience the openness as a blessing.

Amen!