

May 23, 2021 Pentecost Day (B)
Acts 2:1-21 and John 15:26-16:15
What Gives Us Unity?

There is a beauty to true unity. And there is a beauty to diversity. And I can't think of a single thing on earth which has as much potential to show the beauty of unity and the beauty of diversity as the church does. We are beautifully united and we are beautifully diverse.

There's no better time to celebrate the diversity of the Kingdom of God than on the Day of Pentecost. Separately, our differences are too diverse to list, but put together, our individual uniqueness creates a beautiful mosaic we call the Body of Christ.

In the St. Louis Cathedral in St. Louis, Missouri there is a beautiful mosaic on one wall—a picture made out of little pieces of tile and rock and glass. When you stand back and look at it from a distance, it is beautiful. But if you get right up next to it and look at the individual tiles, you see the smudges and the cracks and the imperfections. That is the church.

The church is meant to be united. Sadly, today we see people and nations torn apart by racism, religious chauvinism, man-made borders and cultural bigotry. We have become a culture of us-versus-them, where the "other" is to be feared and never trusted. This is not a new occurrence, but one would have hoped that humanity would have learned from its past mistakes and recurrent genocides over the ages; however, here we are in the 21st century, repeating history again and getting worse at it.

Pentecost is a reminder that God's Holy Spirit is given freely to all people with no respect for race, culture, socioeconomic standing, gender or any other distinguishing mark used by people to differentiate one person from another. In Jesus we are one.

On the Day of Pentecost, reported in the Book of Acts, people gathered in Jerusalem from all corners of the Roman Empire. They represented competing economic interests, diverse cultures, a myriad of languages and different religious traditions. There were Pharisees, Saducees, Herodians, Zealots and Essenes—and they all thought they have the best idea about what was good for the church and who the people of God were supposed to be. Nevertheless, God's grace was given freely to all who heard the message preached by Peter, and thousands converted to Christ. These

aliens who converged on Jerusalem returned to their homes and spread the message of Christ, and the church began to spread like a wildfire.

From its inception, the church was a diverse group of people who hailed from a variety of cultures and languages. It was in the midst of this great diversity that God sent the Holy Spirit upon his church and started a movement that would change the history of the world forever.

The message of Christ hasn't changed, but those who claim to be his followers have often failed miserably in living up to that message. The greatest temptation facing Christians isn't necessarily losing their passion, but rather, losing sight of the fact that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female. In God's kingdom there are no illegal aliens or undocumented workers. We who have died with Christ in baptism are resurrected to be a new people bound in love and service to one another.

The Holy Spirit is given freely, without respect for citizenship or socio-economic class, and God continues today to pour out his Spirit on all humanity. How did the prophet Joel put it?

*"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on **all people**. Your **sons and daughters** will prophesy, your **young** men will see visions, your **old** men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, **both men and women**, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."*

The Holy Spirit works as a transformative agent in the lives of believers. Just as Jesus glorified humanity when he ascended to the Father, the gift of the Holy Spirit restores our relationship with God.

In the fourth century, St. Basil wrote:

"Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven, and adopted as children, given confidence to call God 'Father' and to share in Christ's grace, called children of light and given a share in eternal glory."

In order for this transformation to take place, we must be willing to die to ourselves and surrender ourselves to Christ and God's will for our lives.

This is what Jesus had been preparing his disciples for when he said, *"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" ~ Matthew 16:24*

Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit whose fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These fruits are the qualities of Jesus that the Holy Spirit develops in our lives as we grow in our faith. That's who we are and who we are to become as Christians. The Holy Spirit transforms the believer into the image of Christ and obliges the Christian to share in the Church's apostolic and missionary activity. Just as the disciples' bold and fearless witness at Pentecost led to the conversion of more than 3,000 people, so too are we called to bear witness of God's love for the world today. This love is freely given to all humanity.

The Holy Spirit compels us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. One way we do this is by reaching out to the unloved, the hard to love, and the rejected in our midst and loving them, emulating our Heavenly Father's love for us who are called by His name.

An elderly man of some affluence once asked a pastor how he could possibly learn to serve the least in society. The pastor answered, "You will be able to serve others when you see the crucified Christ in every person you meet, regardless of their social standing." That is a tall order to fulfill, but not an impossibility for those who allow the indwelling Holy Spirit to work in them.

Every time we, who are baptized into the Body of Christ, celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are reminded of God's love for us. It is around the holy table gathered with our brothers and sisters in Christ that our Heavenly Father graciously accepts us as living members of his own Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, and feeds us with spiritual food in the blessed Sacrament.

Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we welcome new believers into the blessed family we call the Body of Christ. As they pass through the waters of baptism we are asked to do all in our power to support them in their life in Christ. All of us have an important role to play in their spiritual development. It is no small thing what we do around the baptismal font, since all of us take solemn vows for which God will hold us accountable.

Just as the Holy Spirit was poured out on peoples of every language at Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit today continues to draw people from every culture, language and ethnicity into the family we call the church catholic. Pentecost is an awe-inspiring day of joy and celebration on many levels. Through the Holy Spirit, we welcome strangers into our midst and become

family, and we welcome the Holy Spirit into our lives and become transformed into the image of Christ.

I'll close with a peanuts cartoon. In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn't. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

Get ready, church. Get ready for the gift of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost to renew us today and stir up within us those spiritual gifts which God has so richly and freely given to us when we were baptized into Christ's holy church. Get ready for the Spirit. Amen.