

Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday. June 9, 2019. Acts 2:1-21.

Two great feasts are contending for our imagination this morning. I hope that the most obvious one is the Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came in fire and tongues to shake the church out of the rooms where it was still hiding; to spill the church out into the streets among the people; when Babel is redeemed and difference is made unto us a gift, instead of a reason for division. It is often called the birthday of the church, because the church is only fully its true self when it is waist-deep in the vibrant chaos of the world, finding new words and ways to tell a hurting world of the love of God we have seen in Jesus Christ.

And, it is the *lesser* feast of the Parish Picnic, which I think was first solemnized by an archbishop in the fourth century, but was strangely left off the official church calendar this year. On this day we look back at the program year we are completing, celebrating the work God has done among us over the last nine months, and especially the work of our Sunday School teachers, choir, and young acolytes, who are getting ready to take the summer off. Today (at 10:30) we are blessing our graduates, as they stand on the threshold of a new phase of their lives and their parents try to sort through that curious mixture of grief and relief that only comes along a few times in our lives.

These two feasts seem to be at odds with each other. Picnic day invites us to look back in gratitude. Pentecost is the reminder that the Holy Spirit is always pushing the church forward into the new, the surprising, the challenging — whether the church wants to go there or not. Today puts all of us, along with our graduates, at a kind of threshold. By any common measure, we have had a fantastic year here. We have a lot to celebrate and many reasons to be grateful to God and our siblings through whom God has been present to us. Y'all continually amaze me with your skill and faithfulness, and I hope you pay close enough attention to each other to be amazed by the people next to you in the pew.

And . . . we may not allow gratitude to lead to complacency. Pentecost reminds us of the Holy Spirit's habit of breaking up even very good customs to bring in something new. And so even as we look back in gratitude, we look ahead at what new thing God may be preparing to do among and through us. We have no choice: that's the nature of the God we love, the God who is saving us, often by kicking us out of rooms where we have been very comfortable.

Don't worry, I'm not going to use Pentecost to push some specific new program hatched up over a staff meeting. I don't know what new thing the Spirit may call us to. But I have some ideas from the day of Pentecost on what might be involved. First, I think the Spirit tends to work by suggesting to us things that arrive as complete surprises, and become the most obvious things in the world. Of course these first friends of Jesus were booted out of their room to spread the good news during a festival when Jerusalem was full. Of course God miraculously made it possible for people to hear the story in their

own language—how else were they to understand? Of course the gospel would spread to non-Jews and Christian faithfulness would be transformed in the conversations that followed. These obvious things were impossible to imagine before God did them, and they are the kind of unimaginable obvious things we should continue to watch for the Spirit to do.

Second, the new things the Holy Spirit calls us into tend to push us beyond these walls, where we aren't comfortable, where we may not even be quite safe. The gospel insists on getting out into the world. When we try to carry the good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ, we quickly find that it is carrying us into the hurly burly where God's love is needed most.

And in this hurly burly, inevitably, we will find folks who aren't much like us. In our first reading today, the story of the Tower of Babel is a mythical explanation of how difference came into the world—here, specifically the difference of language. Its pairing with the story of Pentecost shows us God redeeming difference. It is not the case that everyone in the Jerusalem streets hears and miraculously understands one language. They hear, somehow, each their native tongue. The difference of tongues, born at Babel as a sign of confusion, is here redeemed by being made no longer a barrier to the sharing of the love of God. Difference isn't erased; the converts that day aren't made to learn a new language first. But it is no longer a valid excuse for division. Difference is the arena in which the love of God works. The Holy Spirit is not intimidated by the ways we divide ourselves. We are called instead to share in God's love through difference. If everyone we love is an awful lot like us, then there's a very good chance that we aren't listening to the call of the Spirit.

I don't know what God will call us to next. I think that it will be an obvious surprise, will push us out beyond our walls, and will challenge us to redeem the differences we have let divide us. But looking back at this past year makes me so grateful that we together are the people who will respond to that call. Amen.