

A Pentecostal Church
Acts 2:1-21

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place”.

The apostles weren't always gathered, obviously. Each had his own ministry to attend to. Each had priorities and obligations – especially since Jesus had left the continuation of his teaching in their multiple hands. They had their own callings and their own communities to reach. And as Hal shared in his “Why are We Waiting?” sermon last week, *they had to get on with it!*

But on this holy day – Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, 50 days after Passover – they were gathered as they had gathered on other holy days: all together in one place.

Miracles can happen in community. Miracles like the one shared in today's reading. The unexpected experience of a power coming over the gathered; the moment when a mission reveals itself; and the future can be visualized with such clarity...dreaming dreams and seeing visions.

In assembly, Church happens. Or, it did on that Pentecost when the apostle's had gathered, open to next steps, united in past and in purpose. They became the Church. And that's a miracle for any community!

I wonder if that's how it occurred in 1957 when the United Church of Christ came into existence? Did the 2 very different denominations – the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches – gather in a room where they were overcome by the Spirit, began speaking in tongues and received the inspiration to unite?

Knowing how our words can be heard and interpreted in interesting ways, sometimes the speaking in tongues part indeed seems very real.

Yes, the Holy Spirit was present in the uniting of those 2 bodies which gave birth to our beloved community. But the birthing did not happen without pangs.

While the Evangelical and Reformed Churches voted all of its congregations into the new denomination as one, the Congregational Christian Churches worked from a different model – each individual church got to decide *for itself* if it wanted to be a covenantal member of this new creation...the United Church. Our own Plymouth Congregational Church took 2 years to discern the Spirit's call in the matter, and in 1959, we finally voted to join the UCC. Other congregational churches took much longer...some never did join.

At the same time, a few Evangelical & Reformed churches that had initially become UCC left after a short time. Perhaps some of you know that for 4 years – between 1959 and 1963 – there were TWO UCC Churches in Fort Collins? Immanuel United Church of Christ, one of our E&R ancestors who joined along with that denomination, left the United Church after 6 years to enter the Christian Reformed denomination.

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Collins, however, chose to enter the covenant and has remained. That gathering of members had a Pentecost moment...they became the Church.

Hearing the rush of the Spirit's claim on this congregation, individuals as distinct as the apostles in today's reading gathered and discerned Plymouth's mission to be one with each other and one with the UCC.

Part of that mission is spoken in our very name: The UNITED Church of Christ. We are a church that has taken as our motto the words of Jesus' prayer as written in John's Gospel: “That they may all be one”¹. “This motto...

reflects the spirit of unity on which the church is based and points toward future efforts to heal the divisions in the body of Christ. We are a uniting church as well as a united church”². We are called, in part, to help Jesus’ prayer become manifest in the world.

The UCC also recognizes the very real differences alive in all thriving communities, and therefore we try to live by another statement: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity”.

One of the UCC’s pamphlets that describes who we are and what we believe explains, “The unity that we seek requires neither an uncritical acceptance of any point of view nor a rigid formulation of doctrine. It does require mutual understanding and agreement as to which aspects of Christian faith and life are essential”³.

So, Plymouth members and friends – assembled of the church, Pentecost people – which aspects of Christian faith and life are essential to you? What is it that calls you to be a part of Christ’s church...of Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ? What are the essentials? And what are the nonessentials?

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I’ve often noticed that when I begin thinking about a certain subject or notice a particular occurrence, then similar topics or happenings keep catching my attention. I know many of you have experienced the same.

Since I began preparing for this Pentecost Sunday, I’ve had several of these synchronistic encounters. I’ve had opportunities to talk with people about the UCC’s values and our goals of unity in Christ despite difference. I’ve looked through our denomination’s brochures in preparation for tomorrow’s new members gathering. And a number of you mentioned your deep prayer for our own church’s unity and faithfulness to our congregation’s covenant amidst our many differences of opinion.

But the first thing that sparked my preparation this week was an image from the *Christian Century* magazine. Editor John Buchanan recommended some choice summer reading as he wrote:

*The March*, by E.L. Doctorow, is a historical novel about General Sherman’s march to the sea. Doctorow creates unforgettable characters as 60,000 Union troops tramp from Atlanta east through Georgia to the sea and up into the Carolinas in 1864. Near the end of the book Sherman, whose own son William died of illness at home while Sherman was at war, learns that a Confederate general’s son has died in battle. Sherman weeps and writes a letter: “And now, General, we have both lost a son...I look forward to the day this nation is united again and the natural order is restored and our generations die once again appropriate to their God-given ranks. At that time, my dear General, I hope we may meet and commiserate as fellow soldiers.”<sup>4</sup>

What captured me in this short piece was the recognition once again that this war was between the United States of America – it was the UNITED States that were so violently struggling against one another. Brother against brother, God’s creation against itself.

And that knowledge pushed me once more to the UCC’s identity resource, which reminds and cautions us: “The unity of the church is not of its own making. It is a gift of God. But expressions of that unity are as diverse as there are individuals. The common thread that runs through all is love....As individual members, we are free to believe and act in accordance with our perception of God’s will for our lives. But we are called to live in a loving, covenantal relationship with one another – gathering in communities of faith, congregations of believers, and local churches”<sup>5</sup>.

I think it is not only appropriate that we have a Congregational Meeting on Pentecost, but it is *exciting* too! I also consider it intriguing and not an accident that the year this congregation voted to join the United Church of Christ – 1959 – was also the year that members began construction on this very building.

A Congregational Meeting –  
 no matter if it is to vote to join a new denomination,  
     or if it is to gather for the general business of the church,  
         or if it's to call a clergy person,  
             or to consider an Open and Affirming or Peace with Justice stance,  
                 or to discern the church's growth and construction –  
*no matter what the apparent & visible purpose*, a Congregational Meeting is intended for the mission of Christ's  
 Church; and to be so, it must be a Pentecost moment, with the presence of wind and flame.

Wind with its life-giving breath and flow and movement to inspire.  
 Flame with its illumination of the way and fiery passion and purifying power.

Without this presence we are individuals gathered in a room.  
 With it we are *ekklesia* – the assembled – the body of Christ acting in the world.

With it, we are the Church.

Each of us has our ministry to attend to. Each has our priorities and obligations. Each even has our own tongues  
 and language with which we speak.  
 We are a Pentecost Church, united with the Living Christ when we allow the Spirit to move freely and speak to  
 the whole.

Individually. As One.  
 May we celebrate the Pentecostal Spirit that loves us and desires to be a part of our gathering here.  
 Amen.

<sup>1</sup> John 17:21

<sup>2</sup> *United Church of Christ: Who We Are, What We Believe*, United Church Press: 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Buchanan “Pages to go” in *The Christian Century*, p. 3, May 30, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *United Church of Christ: Who We Are, What We Believe*