

“Empowering and Embracing”
Genesis 11.1–9 and Acts of the Apostles 2.1–12
The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC,
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The Christian tradition has a lot of strange, phenomenal stories about the experience of the faithful, but the story of Pentecost is right up there with the oddest of them. The author of the Acts of the Apostles, who also wrote the Gospel According to Luke, describes something that few of us have ever experienced: people from all over the world witnessing a proclamation that was spoken in Aramaic, but that was perceived by hearers in their own language. It’s as if you were at the United Nations, listening to simultaneously translation, but you didn’t have a translator at the other end of your earpiece: you heard Kofi Annan speaking English, but a Chinese person heard him speaking Mandarin, and a Saudi heard him in Arabic, and an Austrian was quite sure that he was speaking German.

Pentecost describes not “speaking in tongues,” but a reversal of the Tower of Babel experience introduced in Genesis. We lost the power of international communication with this foundational story in Genesis, and we have been trying to understand each other ever since. God knows we still don’t understand each other, and that we ourselves construct walls – linguistic, racial, social, religious, gender – that divide us from one another. Woodrow Wilson claimed that the First World War was “the war to end all wars,” but that vision has not borne fruit, certainly not in the bloodiest century known in human history. Perhaps tomorrow on Memorial Day, we ought to redouble our efforts to pray and work for international reconciliation and peace, that those who gave their lives in war will not have died in vain.

One can assert that diversity is a good thing: that it’s great to have people of different races, nationalities, orientations, and philosophies in our midst, which is true so long as we find common ground and also respect differences.

In the Pentecost event, people didn’t shed their nationality, they were finally able to understand across one of the barriers that divided Parthians from Medes, (and as Paul would assert) Jew from Greek, slave from free, male from female. It must have been for them as meaningful as the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, which was a symbol of ending oppression, release of the captives, and a new day dawning. Our sister church, First Congregational UCC in Boulder, has had a long relationship with the Thomaskirche in Erfurt in the former East Germany, and they have walked with that congregation from the days of the Iron Curtain into a new sense of nationhood, and they have experience the kind of bridge-building the Pentecost event can engender. And as Sarah Blessing from our church heads off to visit our partner church, the Pentecostal Evangelical Union of Venezuela.

Pentecost is the day of international understanding and the call of the church of Jesus Christ to unite all people. The church is called to relive the Pentecost event again and again: breaking down walls and barriers that divide us.



I don’t know if this is true for you, but when I hear the word “Pentecostal,” I flinch a bit. I think of Holy Rollers and loud, worship devoid of contemplation. That’s probably not a fair or accurate portrait, but that is my stereotype.

I once told a friend that the only time people in the UCC raise their hands above their heads is when we vote at a congregational meeting. And while Episcopalians are often called the “frozen chosen,” I think some of us in the Congregational tradition give

them a run for their money. We tend to have worship that is characterized by balance, decorum, intellect, and a sometimes even a contemplative aesthetic. Our worship style reflects who we are as a religious tradition. We didn't just spring onto the scene in 1957 when the UCC was founded; we have roots that go back to the Puritans and the Pilgrims, the German Reformed immigrants of the 18th century in Pennsylvania and later German Evangelical immigrants in the 19th century in the Midwest, and Volga Germans in the early 20th century. These were *not* people who took their religion lightly.

I think it's okay that we are who we are as a denomination, and that we should celebrate that! But, at the same time we can appreciate the contributions of other Christian traditions, even if we do not choose to incorporate their system of governance, clerical and episcopal authority, worship style, or evangelistic emphasis into our own.

A month or so ago, I asked our general minister and president, John Thomas, about denominationalism and how he saw the UCC in light of our current television ad, which raises up the uniqueness of our tradition. John recalled that in 1896 at the first Congress of World Religions, held in Chicago, the great German Reformed theologian Philip Schaff had delivered an address in which he compared the myriad Christian denominations to a garden that produced a stunning array of different flowers. The loss of any one flower would have diminished the garden as a whole, and each flower contributed a unique scent and color to the overall landscape.

Using this metaphor, we might see Catholic contemplative spirituality as a vivid, deep purple iris; Episcopal liturgy as an elegant calla lily; Southern Baptist fervor as a fragrant, red rose; Presbyterian order as a perfectly formed tulip, and so on. The loss of any variety of flower would diminish the garden, which could not be complete without all the flowers.

So, what is the color and fragrance of the United Church? Is our worship style that of a primrose? Is our democratic polity like a field of wildflowers? Is our commitment to justice and peace analogous to a rich, orange poppy? (Perhaps a tangle of vines that represent our committee structure!)

What do you think we in the UCC bring into the garden, which makes our unique contribution?

One of our hallmarks, too, has been that we have a deep commitment to ecumenism and interfaith relations, bringing a wide variety of plants and flowers together in a garden. We've done that here at Plymouth through our interfaith activities over the years.

Perhaps we are called to be "Pentecostal," in the sense that we might help one another to understand what sound like foreign languages when others are speaking. Our congregation will have a tremendous opportunity as the Islamic Center of Fort Collins moves forward with plans for a building next to us on Lake Street. (Plans that seem a bit caught up for the moment.) We need to be attentive to occasions when we might be bridge-builders in our community, and then take steps to help people understand one another. In doing that, we can relive the Pentecost experience.



What makes Pentecost possible is not just good will. It isn't having a group of very holy people gathered. And it certainly isn't a one-time experience of the first century.

The Gospel According to John records Jesus as saying, "I will send to you a **παρακλητος**." You may have heard the anglicized version of that word, *paraclete*, which is translated variously as an advocate or helper or comforter. And it is the *paraclete* – the Holy Spirit in our midst – that makes it possible for us to hear in our own language and to assist other people in hearing in their own languages.

One of the most deeply resonant ways I think of the Holy Spirit is contained in the baptismal words that I use, which were developed by the Rev. Nora Smith, who is the mother of Sari Bosch, one of our new members. Nora describes the Holy Spirit as the divine force of love “that empowers and embraces us.”

The Holy Spirit, for some people, encourages religious fervor that manifests itself in emotional outpouring. But it is that same Spirit that encourages in others a sense of contemplation and inner calm. And it is that same Spirit that spurs others on to act for God’s reign of justice and peace.

You may be someone the Spirit encourages to dance; is that gift any less than the one given by the Spirit to sing? We need to welcome all the gifts of the Spirit, in all their diversity and beauty. We are called to be different; the church would be diminished without Mennonites and Quakers who promote pacifism; without Methodists whose “hearts are strangely warmed”; without the Lutherans who are keepers of the seeds of the Reformation.

We are called to be different, we in the United Church of Christ, and this is our *distinctive vocation* from the Holy Spirit. Our call today is to create an inclusive church that does not bar anyone from the full life of the church. And that’s been where the spirit has been leading us in ordaining African-Americans, when other denominations wouldn’t;¹ in ordaining women, when other denominations wouldn’t;² in ordaining people who aren’t straight, when other denominations wouldn’t.³

That is one way our church is called to help lead and provide a way for unheard voices to be understood, whether they are the voices of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the poor, the women, the old, or the young.

As the Holy Spirit embraces and empowers us, may we pass that power and welcome on to others, for this is *our* gift of Pentecost.

Amen.

¹ e.g., Lemuel Haynes in 1785

² e.g., Antoinette Brown Blackwell in 1856

³ e.g., Bill Johnson in 1973