

Unity in the Spirit
(Acts 2, 1 Cor 12, Jn 7)

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Last Sunday for Ascension, Jesus's followers watched as he disappeared into the mystery of the heaven's, leaving them behind. Today we celebrate Pentecost, when he returned in the form of the Holy Spirit, catching everyone by surprise. And one of the important things we learn from today's readings is that, with the Holy Spirit comes the blessing of unity, which is what I would like to focus.

Jesus's Desire for Unity

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he made a point of expressing his desire that, in his absence, his followers remain united. He understood our human tendencies to be divisive and he understood the terrible suffering we inflict on ourselves and on others through the tragic divisions we create.

And so, in his farewell speech to his followers, Jesus carefully described how his presence would continue to provide them with a source of unity. He described that unity as a kind of "spiritual indwelling": That he lives in God and God is alive in him, and that he will live in us and we will live in him.

Jesus was calling their attention to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God's love and compassion, as the reality uniting that would unite them all in one greater being. So that, even as he remained seated at the right hand of God, he would be present at the same time with us.

And so, in 1957, when four Christian denominations merged to become the United Church of Christ, they identified themselves specifically with Jesus's concern for our unity . They took the words from his farewell speech, his prayer "that they may be one" and made it their motto and also their challenge.

It seems pretty clear that one of the sources of division today is our tendency to think too individualistically, as though each one of us were an island unto himself or herself. When we see the open space between us, I think we tend to think of it as empty space that separates us; that I am me over here and you are you over there.

And we tend to build on that and say that what I do over here is my business, and what you do over there is your business and as long as we keep our noses out of each other's business, we are good. We value our independence, which I am sure is a good thing. But when we overvalue it, I think we do so at the expense of the unity Jesus wanted to bless us with.

I think, for example, that many of the churches that once had cubicles with doors separating one family from another and dividing the church into separate properties went a step too far in emphasizing our separateness.

Jesus did not see us as individuals separated from each other by space. He saw us as being in relationship with each other and with God in a way that made our lives inseparable. He saw us as drawing our lives from one shared spiritual source, drawing from the same well. And he saw the sharing of our burdens as the path to a greater life and freedom.

The Apostle Paul's description of the "Body of Christ", I think faithfully describes Jesus's vision for how we should see our lives. Instead of being islands unto ourselves, we are all parts of one body. And each has come into being to provide a particular kind of support to the body as a whole. So that the wellness of each part of the body depends on the wellness of the whole, and the wellness of the whole depends on the contribution of each part.

It is true that there is air space between us that we can use to draw lines across, to emphasize that we are separate. But when we take into account the gift of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus has sent into us, then we

begin to see that, the air space that separates, does not make us entirely separate, because we carry within ourselves an invisible spiritual truth that makes us continuous with each other and makes us one.

The Spirit that unites us, makes us intelligible to each other, in spite of our differences and makes our hearts go out to each other. So that we experience what is done to others as something done to us. It is the Spirit of compassion. As Jesus said, “What you do to the least of these my children, you do to me.”

And so, today on Pentecost we celebrate Jesus’s return and the precious oneness we have in his spirit. It is the unity that makes it possible for us to recognize each other and be blessed by each other, in spite of the fact that we sometimes sound to each other like we are speaking different languages.

Metaphors for our Unity: Tree

I’d like to share with you two metaphors for thinking about how we are connected in the Holy Spirit. The first is a poem by Susan Palo Cherwein that I inserted into the bulletin for you. I’d like to read it again.

“Growing in the Spirit”

In Colorado
there is a beautiful grove of Aspens
acres to the east and west
acres to the north and south.
Some of the trunks are slight and slender,
others taller and stately.
Some provide light shade,
others deep shadow.

But scientists have discovered
that beneath the seeming separateness
of all those rustling aspens
is a single system of roots.
They have discovered
that all of these Aspens are in truth
one tree –
acres to the east and west,
acres to the north and south
one system of roots for all those varied trunks
one tree
For all those trembling leaves.

What I find most interesting about the poem is the role that invisibility plays in it. We don't even suspect that the whole mountainside is one tree, because the roots are invisible to us. And the poem seems to be suggesting that we ought to be more attentive to the Spirit that connects us, which is also not visible.

Lightbulb

The other metaphor is the “lightbulb.” The philosopher Joseph Campbell once described human beings as being like “lightbulbs.” If you look at the lightbulbs in the ceiling, on a lamp, or anywhere in the house, even on a Christmas tree, each one appears to be an individual bulb with its own light. The particular quality of each light depends on things like the bulb’s shape and wattage, the color of the glass, it’s environment and so on.

But in reality all the lights in the house are not separate, they are all running on the same invisible current that is running continuously in all of them. And so, if you are inclined to think of it this way, then you and I are all like lightbulbs that run of the same current. And when we recognize this, that current becomes a current of compassion, a current that we know as the Spirit of Jesus. Pentecost is like the moment when Jesus hit the light switch and turns us all on

It is an interesting way of looking at ourselves, because it suggests that at our deepest level, we are not separate but one. That what is giving me life is what is giving you life, and that, when I see myself in you or you see yourself in me, it is may be more than just an expression. And

when we honor the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” it may be that our neighbors are much more ourselves than we realize.

Patriotism

However you choose to think about this invisible unity, I think it is very relevant to the second important commemoration that we have today, Memorial Day. Memorial Day itself only makes sense if we share the belief in serving something larger than ourselves. That concern or love for the greater whole is fundamental to Patriotism and to the way we understand the sacrifices of the men and women in uniform who we remember this weekend.

True patriots rejoice in and are dedicated to the well-being of the whole. They “believe in liberty and justice for all.” They do not disparage or sabotage their fellow citizens, but rejoice in the well-being and noble successes of others as though it were their own. They are grateful to those fellow citizens who have given of themselves in order to provide the benefits they have enjoyed, and they are ready to lend a hand and work together with others, making sacrifices if necessary, in time of need. (And it doesn’t matter what color light bulb your light bulb).

So perhaps it is fitting that Pentecost and Memorial Day weekend are coinciding. Both celebrate the example of those who sought to be a blessing to a life larger than their own. May we as a church fulfill the desire of Jesus our founder, that we may be one in the Spirit.