Feast of Pentecost – 2017

This feast of Pentecost, this feast of the Holy Spirit, is all about recognizing the Presence of the multitudinous gifts of the Spirit present in each and all of us, and about coming to appreciate that Diversity as an Expression of the richness of God.

Paul writes in 1st Corinthians: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”

We have our differences – different gifts, different service, different activities. And for us as humanity, that is both our gift and our challenge.

The event of Pentecost described in the reading from Acts- where the apostles speak one tongue that is heard by each in one’s *own* language - has been compared to the story about the tower of Babel. In Genesis 11 we’re told that all the people spoke one language, and they were all “one people” – and

**“4**Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. **6**The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.**7**Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

And so thus we have the explanation for why there came to be so many different languages, and why from “one people” humans were scattered over all the earth. According to the story, there was UNITY before diversity.

When we’re born into the world, we, too, have a wonderful sense of unity. Basically, everything to an infant is one – and it’s all mine. As a baby, my fist in my mouth is mine, and when I put your finger in my mouth, it’s mine, too! And so we teach the child the difference between mine and yours. In fact, child development involves a lot of learning about difference – big, little; square, circle; green, red.

Along the way, we come to recognize that we have certain preferences and gifts. I like baseball more than football. I’m good at music but lousy at sewing. I prefer pizza to liver and onions. And we even recognize that other people have different preferences and abilities and ideas. I like blue, and you like green. I like steak, and you’re a vegetarian.

The problem comes in somewhere along the line when the word “different” begins to be translated as “odd” or outside the community norm or “wrong.” Your ideas or preferences are no longer simply different from mine, they are dangerous or a challenge to community and harmony; they’re wrong. If any two things are compared, one will be judged as better or worse than the other. We have great difficulty in simply letting things be how they are, in letting things be different. I just know that things would be so much better if everyone saw things the way I do!

The psalmist, though, tells us that the differences are part of the expression of God:

O LORD, how manifold are your works! \*in wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth.

The Spirit is the font of life, the source of all the diversity we see around us. From the Unity that is the One God comes forth “manifold works” – the variety of all creation. Yes, there are different gifts, different ministries, different works – but they all come from the One Spirit. And “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The common good. Many gifts – drawn into One good. The diversity is present as an Expression of the One.

So here is the cycle: We go from unity – one people at the tower of Babel, or the one world of the baby, to differentiation – diversity – speaking many languages, and letting difference separate us --- and then called by this feast of Pentecost to recognize the Spirit’s presence IN the diversity – to recognize the Spirit in YOUR voice, as different as it may be from my own. I CAN hear and understand you, once I acknowledge the Spirit’s presence, once I become conscious that the Spirit of God is present. There’s the ticket: Once I become *conscious* that the Spirit of God is present right there in the difference.

Difference, diversity, is nothing less than God expressing God’s fullness. One creature, one tree, one gender, one color, one way of being in the world, one name can never fully express the fullness of God. So when I hold on desperately to one way of doing something, when I view a people as lazy or backward because they don’t hold the values that have shaped me; if I insist that there is only one true religion or that some people are worth more than others – then I am in essence denying the richness of the full expression of the Spirit of God. I’m turning the gift of diversity into the curse of separation. I let ‘difference’ be the source that divides us.

But when I recognize the GIFT of the difference, the diversity, then I’m drawn into the Oneness that is God.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

We each start out as a single cell…and from that one cell come hundreds of *different* cells – that become blood and hair, a heart and arms and eyes and feet. And somehow they come together in a unity, a oneness, that is this body. The differences enable us to be.

The cycle is this: unity, expressing itself in diversity, then leading us back into unity –into the Oneness that is God.

May we so open ourselves to the Spirit that we may both use our gifts for the common good and recognize the different gifts of others as expressions of that same Spirit, in Christ our Lord. Amen.