

Being Pentecost People
Acts 2:1-21
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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There is a children's book written by Esau McCaully and beautifully illustrated by LaTonya Jackson titled *Josey Johnson's Hair and the Holy Spirit*. This story takes place the weekend of Pentecost. Josey and her dad have a full Saturday planned going to the salon to have her hair done and then shopping for a new red dress to wear to church on Pentecost. As they wait at the salon Josey starts talking to her dad about her hair and how it isn't like most of the girls' at school who have straight hair.

Their conversation turns to the diversity of creation. Finally Josey asks, "Why did God make us different?" to which her dad replies, "We're all different because God is creative. Each one of us is God's unique work of art....Josey, your Black hair, Black lips, and Black skin are God's work of art!" (McCaully, InterVarsity Press, 2022).

As they go on with their day shopping for a new dress, Josey finally asks her dad about Pentecost. He tells her the story and ends by saying, "Josey, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is for all people, no matter what language they speak, the color of their skin, or the curl of their hair. That's what we celebrate on Pentecost!" (McCaully).

"The next morning at church, Josey looked around and realized that her church was like Pentecost - it had all different kinds of people. And it was all so beautiful!" (McCaully).

Today is Pentecost!

And there are so many images and meanings tied up in this day.

The story itself is flooded with sites and sounds. The sound like a rushing wind. The sight of flames, as of fire, resting on each person.

And, while Pentecost was first a Jewish holy day, within Christianity it is often talked about as the birthday of the church. It is the pivotal story in Acts where the followers of Jesus move from watching and waiting to carrying the good news into the world. It is that moment when they no longer stay in the background, but when they become leaders of this Jesus movement.

This experience on Pentecost is what they had been waiting for - the coming of the promised Spirit.

Now sometimes, when we talk about Pentecost, we also talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the fact that we are all gifted and called to serve in our own particular ways, to continue the work of Jesus in this world just as his first followers did.

There is so much going on in this story and it contains so many reminders for us.

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But what I don't want us to miss today is this idea of everyone hearing in their own native language. Sure, we notice that part of the scripture - after all, we are impressed when our scripture reader, like Marian today, reads through those verses without tripping on their tongues.

You remember what I'm talking about. Beginning in verse 7, it reads, "They were surprised and amazed, saying, 'Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!' They were all surprised and bewildered" (Acts 2:7-12a, CEB).

Friends, we often talk about how all are welcome. In fact, seldom does a worship service pass without our saying those words whether at the communion table or at any other point in worship. We embrace that God's love is for all, that all are invited to the table and into the family of God. We say it. We believe it. We try to live it.

And sometimes it is difficult.

Sometimes we aren't eager to welcome people who are different from us. Sometimes we see differences as being about better or worse rather than embracing the diversity of God's good creation. Sometimes, even when we believe in the value of diversity, we know the reality that diversity can also be hard...it takes work...it asks us to listen, to learn, and to meet people where they are, sometimes in ways we haven't had to do before.

This story reminds us how important that is. After all, when we listen we can hear the relief in the conversation that takes place as people from a great variety of backgrounds look at each other with wonder realizing they are hearing in their own native language.

Back in 2006, on my first sabbatical, Jim and I had the privilege of traveling to Switzerland and France. One day we found ourselves in Paris, outside a restaurant, looking at the posted menu. As you might expect, it was written in French. And we did not know much French. But, we knew enough to identify a chicken dish or a beef dish. And we had chosen to come to a place where we did not speak the primary language. We knew we would order something and it would likely be delicious even if it wasn't what we expected. But then the host, who had been watching us for a few minutes, walked over. "This might help," they said as they handed us an English version of the menu.

They didn't have to do that. We would have been fine. But there was a palpable relief when we saw what they were offering. It mattered that they saw who we were and met us in the midst of that reality.

That is who our God is. While we may draw lines that divide us by language, by culture, by skin color, by sexuality, by ability...by so, so many different details...ours is a God who is the God of all of us and who moves in ways to meet us in the midst of our lives.

See, friends, this Pentecost story is about more than the language we speak. This is about a Spirit that blows in and among and through us in ways that affirm and honor who people are.

So, I want to say a word directed at our high school graduates who we are celebrating today. The rest of you can keep listening, too, but seniors, you are at a pivotal moment in your lives. Your world is about to become so much broader. This is true whether you are staying here in Iowa City, or whether you are venturing to Ohio or California or some other distant location. This is true whether you will be continuing your education or starting a job. This next step for you is new because you take it as an adult, as one who will always have a system of support behind you, but who will be invited to make more and more independent choices in new ways with each year that passes. This next step is important because it is likely that you will meet a greater variety of people and have a greater variety of experiences than you have so far.

And I think this Pentecost story has a special word for you. After all, it is a reminder that not only do you carry God with you and have the opportunity to live in ways that represent God and serve the world, but you also have the opportunity to honor people by meeting them where they are, to get to know who they are, to listen to their stories and learn their truths. You will likely meet many people who are different from you. And sometimes that might be overwhelming. But our God is a God of all people and so you are encouraged to meet them with understanding instead of assumption, with wonder rather than expectation.

I keep thinking back to that children's book I started with. The reminder, not just to our high school students, but to all of us, that God is creative and that every person is a unique work of art, is so important. We live in a diverse world. We celebrate our diverse world. And as Pentecost people we are called to meet people, not as we would have them be, but as they are, and make connections that our human family may become one. Amen.