

Experiencing the Spirit Ourselves

Pentecost, which literally just means fifty, because it takes place fifty days after the Passover feast, is the Greek name for the Jewish feast of Shavuot. That was the feast of weeks, one of the three main feasts in the Jewish tradition, and it was the feast that celebrated the harvest of wheat. In the Acts story, that is why this diverse cast of folks were gathered together on this occasion. They had come from all over, the far reaches of the empire and the known world – Macedonia and Mesopotamia, Cappadocia and Phrygia, Judea and Egypt, Libya and Rome. They met up in Jerusalem to offer the gifts of their own harvest, to worship the God who provided for them, and to celebrate the fact that there was a harvest and they survived another year. Now they weren't all farmers offering grain, though I'm sure some were. There were fisherman and shepherds, tax collectors and money changers, cloth dealers and potters, rabbis and servants, temple workers and government officials. They all came from their own place, speaking their own language, and offering the sacrifices of their own toil to the feast of the harvest because they understood, as the collect from our evening prayer service says, that our common life depends on each other's toil, so the harvest was about everyone.

They spoke the diverse languages of the successive empires that had been splitting humanity for generations. I'm sure some spoke Aramaic, and others Greek, and maybe a few Latin, while some spoke the languages of Egypt, or Assyria, or Babylon, or some other conquering power who had subjugated them. But they came together because they hoped there was something deeper than these differences that might actually be transcendent, something more fundamental to their being and universal to their existence to be experienced that might be found here amongst others from across the globe.

They brought all of their diversity of culture, language, life experience, occupation, and insight to this one place because they believed that there was some unifying bond between them, something they were all looking for in common, but for the life of them, it was hard to discern exactly what that was in the face of the difficulties of their differences. That's understandable. They hoped their bond might be their God, but now that Jesus had left them, it was a little hard to imagine how that would play out.

But then, in a moment that all changed. The Holy Spirit entered the scene like a rushing wind. And with tongues of fire the Spirit helped them to know each other on their own terms, to appreciate the other in their idiosyncrasies, and to express their common bonds across the bounds of difference. This Spirit was the one Jesus had promised he would leave for them, the bringer of peace, the one who would empower them to do greater things than even he did. This was the one he had called the Advocate; and what does an advocate do? – he helps you to express your story and perspective to someone else who might be skeptical, unsympathetic, or simply unfamiliar. That is the Spirit that came, and it changed the future of the church.

Some people thought they were just drunk. Some people failed to understand what was so special about the moment. But many of them got what this meant. It meant Jesus was present again – in them and between them and among them, creating the very community that he had

promised was possible. Rather than being left alone after his ascension, they were surrounded by the person of Jesus in everyone they met in the church and they could share the common language of that experience of hope. It meant that the golden age of Jesus ministry was not in the past, when he walked the earth, but was yet to come as his Spirit filled each member and brought them into the common cause to multiply their efforts far beyond the scope of Jesus or even his first disciples.

In the presence of the Spirit, diversity was a gift that made them stronger together rather than drove them apart. It wasn't a dominating Spirit, like that of the oppressive empires they had known. It was an uplifting, empowering Spirit that allowed them to appreciate each other on their own terms in the richness of their created being and the fullness of their differentiated lives. This Spirit sent a clear message that the kingdom of God that they were now experiencing was not the next iteration of the powers that had subjugated them in the past. This kingdom did not assimilate but rather celebrated who they were, called them to contribute the full scope of that being to the common good, and encouraged them to appreciate the ones most unlike them for the gifts each brought to the harvest feast.

There is a great French Theologian named Yves Congar, who wrote, "The distinctive aspect of the Spirit is that, while remaining unique and preserving his identity, he is in everyone without causing anyone to lose his [or her] own originality. This applies to persons, peoples, their culture and their talents. The Spirit also makes everyone speak of the marvels of God in [their] own language." The gift of the Spirit was nothing less than the church coming together to be the people of God, and to work for the vision that Jesus had left for them. The Holy Spirit inspires those with diverse gifts to speak one another's language, so they can work together to tell the story of God in our world.

Pentecost is still a harvest feast. That is why we gather here. As Jesus taught us elsewhere, the church's harvest is plentiful – there are many who long for the good news that we have to offer here. But the workers are few – that is why we have to band together, overcome our differences, celebrate our diversity, and communicate in a common language to get the work done.

We gather, bringing the gifts of our own labors, and we come giving thanks that there is a harvest – that God is at work and there is good news worth sharing. We call on God to empower us, on God's Spirit to inspire us, to unify us, to direct us to do the work that God has prepared for us. But we each have to bring all of who we are to our communal life and work, and we each have to endeavor to appreciate what others bring and accept it on its own terms. That takes the presence of God among us. And it takes us putting ourselves forward to be filled with that Spirit that others might know God through us.

The poet Czesław Miłosz has a poem about Pentecost which says:

*Come, Holy Spirit,
bending or not bending the grasses,
appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards or when snow
covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.
I am only a man: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.*

*Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in church
lifts its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,
not me—after all I have some decency—
and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you.*

We all want to know the presence of God and to be filled by the life-giving Spirit. But some of us would rather see it in others first. We have a sense of decency that makes us not want to be those spirit filled church people, those types of people who others might say seem like they are drunk on new wine, or some other such thing. But this Spirit must be experienced firsthand. We must each put forward our very person to be part of the community that God's Spirit is creating here.

We need everyone adding all of who they are – the sum of their experiences, the language of their faith, the gifts of their created being to our work to fulfill Christ's vision for his kingdom in our community. God has given you some skill, some talent, some opportunity, some resource to join in the work of the harvest. We are asking you to contribute it. And in return, we are promising to honor the diversity of those gifts, and to work together to reach our common goal. On this Pentecost Sunday, may the Spirit be upon us, enabling us together to do even greater things than Jesus himself did. Let's feel it like a rushing wind, and let's come together to make the ideal of the church a reality in this time and place. Amen