

Today, Pentecost, is also known as the birthday of the church!

So, what the heck does that mean?

It took me a while to understand this concept, because I thought that Christianity evolved over hundreds of years, slowly gaining momentum along the way as it spread across the world.

It experienced a huge surge in popularity when the emperor, Constantine the Great made Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

So, what's with Pentecost, why is this event that we heard about this morning credited with being the hard and fast beginning of Christianity?

Well, a few reasons.

First of all, it's really when the notion of the Trinity was created, and that's the foundation for our Trinitarian theology.

Before this Pentecost experience, Jesus' followers had him, and their belief in him, and they believed in God, but they didn't have the experience of the Holy Spirit until this miraculous event in a room in which some sort of spirit descended upon all of them.

So, this is the first we hear about the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of God.

It's also the birthday of the church because this is when Jesus' disciples went out and started spreading the Good News, and invited others to join them in their new way of life.

After Jesus was resurrected and up until now, the Disciples were scared and confused.

Today's text said that they were all gathered together in one place, presumably cowering and hiding.

You know what they were doing right after Jesus was killed?

The same thing.

But after this experience, something in them changed and Peter delivered a sermon to those who were gathered, and in one day, over 3,000 people were converted and baptized.

The church grew from 100 to 3,000 in one day!

And they left that room and spread themselves out across the lands to proclaim Jesus' Gospel message of unconditional love.

Our predecessors, those disciples, had a transformative experience in that moment.

Before this, they did not fully recognize or understand who Jesus was, even though he lived with them and ministered to them, was crucified and resurrected and continued to minister to them, they still didn't get it.

They didn't stick with him when he got in trouble, instead they abandoned him.

And after he was resurrected, even though he told them he would rise from the dead, they still had trouble believing it was him.

However, on Pentecost, something changed.

Those dense, slow, skeptical disciples became fearless leaders.

They proclaimed the Gospel in front of large crowds and threatening authorities.

They healed people and performed exorcisms and even went to jail in Jesus' name, where they sang hymns that shook the foundations of the prison cells.

This transformation began in that room, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them.

It's like was the wind and flame of courage and fearlessness came upon them and they went out and began changing the world in Jesus' name, and over 2,000 years later, the movement still rages on.

This beautiful story, one of unity amidst diversity, the celebration of different languages, cultures, classes, ages and genders,

this story of passion and commitment and risk-taking and rule-breaking, this is our story.

This is our beginning, what an amazingly radical inception.

Christianity is not a domestic religion.

It's not for the meek or the mild, it's for the courageous, those who are willing to allow themselves to be personally transformed for the betterment of the world.

That's heavy stuff.

And if you ever look across all the different manifestations of Christianity and wonder if we have anything in common, well our vast diversity makes sense considering the conditions into which our faith was born.

All these people who didn't understand each other, who came from different cultures and backgrounds, and even the Galileans, who were considered back-water nobodies, these people who had traditionally been segregated and sometimes even pitted against one another, they came together.

And the only thing that held them together was their belief that Jesus was the Messiah, the one they'd been waiting for.

He was the culmination of God's promise to them.

And that belief was enough for them to be in ministry together.

They didn't have to be from the right family or the right town or speak the right language or offer up the right prayer or have any other characteristic which traditionally separated the worthy from the unworthy.

They just had to believe that Jesus was the one.

It's ironic that for much of Christian history, we've debated who is allowed to be ordained or be a leader in the church.

We've debated whether LGBT folks can be part of our communities, whether they can get married in our sanctuaries.

We've debated whether interracial couples can be part of our communities, or even if people of color can be part of our churches.

That's why a lot of churches have balconies you know, because that's where the colored people used to sit.

Since our inception, we have found so many ways to try to deny and exclude one another from the extravagance of God's love.

Maybe once and a while we should go back to this text and remember that it's in this chaotic moment, among this beautifully diverse group of people from all corners of the earth, that they received the Holy Spirit.

God could have chosen to give the gift of the Spirit to only a certain people who spoke a certain language or those who were a certain gender or from a certain region.

But God didn't do that.

God said this advocate, this comforter, this ally, called the Holy Spirit that will abide with you until the end of time, this gift if for ALL of you.

No exceptions.

So people can label our radical inclusivity as being liberal or progressive, but I just say, it's us doing the same thing that God did in the beginning.

Even though the church was founded a couple thousand years ago, it's sad to me that this concept of having relationships across our differences is still so difficult for us to live into.

We might have trouble speaking to people who literally speak different language from us, but thankfully there are translation dictionaries, and body language, and other ways of communicating.

We can find our way around language differences.

But what about when were speaking different political or religious languages?

What about someone from a depressed coal-mining town in Appalachia talking to a renewable energy wiz kid from Silicon Valley?

Or a Muslim person speaking to a Southern Baptist from Alabama?

Or the mom of a transgender boy speaking to another mom who thinks her daughter will be unsafe using the restroom with transgender people,

or a Trump supporter talking to a Hillary supporter,

or an undocumented Mexican immigrant, speaking to someone who lost his job to an undocumented worker who now gets paid under the table?

Do you see how many different languages we speak?!

I'm worried that we're not unifying across any of our differences but we're busy dividing and multiplying.

It would be a miracle to me if we could get people with differing perspectives in one room together to hear and respect and understand each other.

And we are all guilty of it, we all make instant judgments, do the 'us versus them' blame game, they're the problem, they're the divisive ones.

If only they could see why they're wrong.

One of my favorite parts of this passage is when Peter makes a speech to the crowd.

All those who were filled with the Holy Spirit were accused of being drunk by the cynical naysayers, but Peter wont stand for that.

He defends those 11 disciples, as the text says that he stood with them and addressed the whole crowd of those gathered from all around Jerusalem.

So, he's standing on his soapbox, and once he's hushed the crowd and gotten their attention, he uses his platform to say something beautiful.

First, he clears up any confusion by saying that the people aren't drunk as it's only 9 in the morning.

And once that rumor is laid to rest, he quotes the prophet Joel from the Old Testament, saying,

*“In the last days it will be, God declares,*

*that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,*

*and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...”*

You guys.

This profound responsibility to prophesy about the goodness in the world, this responsibility belongs to all of us.

Sons and daughters, men and women, young and old, we shall see visions and dream dreams and live into those visions and dreams through our prophetic lives.

God stepped in and gave the spirit to these often-clueless, often timid, people from Galilee and gave them a voice they didn't know they had,

and it changed the world and now we bear the responsibility of continuing to be that voice in our time and place.

This gift of the Spirit that we've also been given, the one poured out *upon all flesh*, it's not for the sake of the perpetuation of the institution of the church, but for the sake of the world.

On this celebration of our birth, let us not be timid or afraid or locked in upper rooms, but excited and eager and filled with joy because we have been given the opportunity and the blessing to live out our faith in this time and place,

carrying the mantle until we pass it on to the next generation.

On that first day, all those people were able to speak different languages and get along.

Perhaps our calling on this birthday is to re-learn how to speak and understand, how to communicate across differences and division.

Because while many differences are insignificant, some grow so deep and wide that they lead to broken families, broken nations and war and violence and destruction.

Let us remember our roots, that we are born out of unity amidst diversity, commonality of purpose across race, gender, class and language.

God trusted those earliest Christians with the responsibility of starting the church and they did a profound job, growing to over 3,000 people in one day.

Let us be courageous enough to continue to live into this prophetic tradition, bucking the status quo,

so irrationally committed to love and justice that people think we are drunk,

let us also be filled with the Holy Spirit, emboldened to see visions and live into our dreams for the future of the world.

Amen.