

“Difference and Unity”

We have been gearing up for today since Easter. At least, according to our scriptures we have. Last week, we stood beside Jesus’ followers as they stood slack-jawed staring into the heavens. We found out we’d have to wait for the Spirit Jesus promised to come. So today we are beside them kneeling in prayer.

That’s right. Locked away in their little room upstairs, they almost missed it. But then again, how do you miss a tornado? The sound like a rushing wind was heard by all in Jerusalem gathered for the festival of Weeks.

Every Pentecost we read the scripture, tell the story: tongues of flame – rushing wind- descending dove...all these mighty images. I imagine most churches think of this day as a sort of birthday celebration...and it is. Except, unlike any birthday I’ve experienced, Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit that comes to each of us is God’s own agent – the very Spirit of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. The Spirit gives us reason to celebrate. The dramatic imagery energizes and motivates us.

So we get up off our knees and welcome the Spirit in. Ah- be careful! If you do that, you are taking a risk! Remember, the Holy Spirit comes from Jesus, and Jesus said, “My yoke is heavy, but my burden is light”. He also said, ““Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) In other words, doing Jesus’ work won’t be easy!

Now, I had Steve give a little introduction to the texts with questions that resonate with the mission of the church...the wider church.

The first question: Does our claim of Christian mean we have to agree with all other Christians? I think you may have guessed that my answer to this would be no. This answer is tied to the second question: Can Christians find a common unity today? And that would be a “yes.” Because the reality is, the church, as a wider community, (and if we are truly following Jesus’ call to follow him) looks outside and find areas that need attention. If all churches could answer the questions: "Who needs us?" and "What can we do with our resources to bear God's love to this part of the world", we could certainly find unity even amongst our differences.

One of the most striking characteristics of the early church was sharing. Not only did people use their talents and strengths to benefit others, they shared their wealth, however great or small. Look more deeply into the Acts of the Apostles. You’ll find it. Stewardship campaigns love this aspect of the church! It is a challenging concept that strikes fear into most modern-day hearts.

And yet, more than one person of influence has encouraged new college graduates to give up the American obsession of self-fulfillment and wealth building. Words like “service to others” and “sacred commitments” have challenged young people to rise to the challenges all around them. It seems fitting, then, that we recognize our graduating seniors today...and remember all those with new college degrees as well.

Can we welcome the Holy Spirit, and fully do what Jesus did?

I've been pondering these questions in the car, back and forth. I usually listen to NPR when I don't have music playing. This week there was a clip from the commencement speech to the Yale graduates by none other than Tom Hanks. For an actor who began as a comedian, he proved to me that he is indeed a student of history. His words that day seem to speak right to us here in these pews:

Tom Hanks..."each of you [is] a shining hope for the nation and the world...generations before you took on the job. Now it's your turn...just as the world has gotten to be a better place, it has also gotten worse at the same time...[this] day is a proper occasion to put a toe in the global waters and I think the mercury shows that things are much as they always have been...In 1981 we achieved riches never before imagined, then the economic balloon burst. In '81 I had a great job on TV. In '82, Bosom Buddies was cancelled. In '71 color TVs in more living rooms than ever showed young Americans still fighting in combat in Viet Nam. In '61 satellites beamed live images around the world for the very first time but those images were of the building of the Berlin Wall..."

"...the positives balance the negatives. The x's equal the y's. Our hopes weigh as much as our fears....Fear is a powerful physiological force in 2011. We here surrounding you look to you hoping you will now somehow through your labors free us from what we have come to fear. ...fear has become the commodity that sells as certainly as sex. Fear is cheap. Fear is easy. Fear gets attention. Fear spreads as fast as gossip. Fear twists facts into fictions that become indistinguishable from ignorance..."

Local nightly news headline said: "are our schools poisoning our children?" Next up, the hottest bikinis for summer. Tom had young children at the time so he paid attention. It turns out that a certain supply of hamburger had bacteria...was taken off market... It had been slated for sale out of state then recalled. So the answer to that news promo was - "NO" Our schools were not poisoning our children - but yes that summer there would be some very hot bikinis at the beach.

It's all about fear and how fear sells.

John Paul Jones once said...

"If fear is cultivated it will become stronger. If faith is cultivated, it will achieve mastery. For I take that fear to be fear in the large scale. Fear itself - intimidating and constant. And I take faith to be what we hold within ourselves, our American ideal of self-determination. Fear is whispered in our ears and shouted in our faces. Faith must be fostered by the man or woman you see every day in the mirror."

"The former snaps at our heels and our synapses, and delays our course. The latter can spur our boot heels to be wandering, stimulate our creativity, and drive us forward. Fear or faith? Which will be our master?"

“Fear will get the worst of the best of us. Peddlers of influence count on that. Thru out our nations constant struggle...we battle fear from outside our borders from with our own hearts every day...”

“You will make the choice to react to one or create the other. ....You stand on the fulcrum between fear and faith. Fear at your back. Faith in front of you...” Choose faith and move forward.

Ultimately, Pentecost is about choosing faith, choosing life, and living it.

Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran pastor, tells this story: ‘A few years ago I talked with a friend of mine who's a pastor in New England. "How's your building program going?" I asked.

"Oh, we ran out of money before we got to the worship space," she said. I thought to myself, "What could be more important than the worship space?" But I kept my thoughts to myself.

"We renovated the basement," she said. "You know, we have a shelter there for homeless men. We put in new showers and renovated the old kitchen. The basement was so drab, and the showers-well, there was only one shower and it was lousy. On the Sunday before the shelter opened, the worship service began as usual in the sanctuary. When it came time for communion, the people carried the bread and the cup downstairs to the basement. The whole congregation gathered around the empty beds. They passed the bread and the cup around the circle. The body of Christ given for you. That night the shelter beds were full, and the worship space still needed a lot of work."

The church calendar still said it was the first Sunday of Advent. But people in that congregation knew that Pentecost wasn't over. Pentecost shaped their life together...’

Will it shape ours? Amen

Tom Hanks, Yale Commencement address, 2011  
Barbara Lundblad, day of Pentecost, May 15, 2005