

“Embracing Diversity”
Acts 2:1–21
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There is a great deal of tension these days between those who view diversity as a gift and seek to embrace it and those who view diversity as a plague and do everything they can to oppose it. DEI conflict is one manifestation of this tension, with a host of nuances, but the tension is manifested in many other ways. While some churches, businesses, universities, and communities see diversity as a priority, others fight it tooth and nail. Some people seem uncomfortable with any difference and thus prefer to be around others just like them.

Through our time in Winston-Salem, most African-American people lived east of 52, most Caucasians lived west of 52, and Latinx people lived in the southern part of the city. Asian-Americans must have missed the memo because they were spread out all over the city. Separation by race didn’t happen accidentally. It was engineered by government and supported by social customs. But we should note that division is not just racial. As Bill Bishop’s 2009 book *The Big Sort* documents, Americans are increasingly separated by race, economics, and political ideation in terms of where they live and everything else.

It just seems that many Americans are increasingly opposed to diversity, not just as a concept or legal issue, but as an everyday reality, while other Americans passionately believe diversity is one of our greatest gifts. So, we experience tension, perhaps not surprisingly, given just how diverse we have become, and yet, the tension is not new. The early church experiences it, as revealed in our reading from Acts 2.

It is the traditional story of Pentecost, one the three great celebrations of Christian faith that goes along with Christmas and Easter. Pentecost just doesn’t get as much press — the dove and tongues of fire, impressive as they are, can’t rival the manger and empty tomb, much less Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. But this is a great day for us!

We think of it as the birthday of the church and the day the Spirit comes, and there is truth in both attachments of meaning, but the church has existed ever since Jesus called disciples, and the Spirit is present in creation. So, in neither case is this truly a first. Yet, God is doing a new thing on this day, as predicted by Joel and Jesus.

Some have called it the democratization of the Spirit, the pouring out of Spirit on all flesh, all people across all categories of difference. As the Apostles gather in Jerusalem on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, there is a sound from heaven like the rush of a violent wind, divided tongues as of fire appear, and a tongue rests on each of them. As a result, people who have gathered from different nations, as pilgrims or immigrants, speaking different languages and representing many cultures and ethnicities, can each hear in his/her own language.

It must work something like the Universal Translator in *Star Trek*, though it comes long before that sci-fi invention, but the point is all the people can hear and understand what is said, and as a result, one community is made of radically diverse people. It is not a reversal of Genesis 11 where God causes people to speak in different languages to divide them and thus tone down their arrogance. They don't go back to one language. But God is using language in a different way - to pull diverse people together without removing their differences. God is saying diversity is not a flaw but a gift. It is how the church is designed.

And yet, not everyone is happy about this. Some people are amazed while others are perplexed. They wonder what it means. They sneer, saying, "They are filled with new wine." In other words, "They are drunk!" Perhaps they don't understand. This is not an everyday experience. Perhaps they do understand. A rush of wind and tongues like fire are unsettling but not as much as building community with outsiders, immigrants, strangers. Let's not forget how long it takes the church, which begins with only Jewish people, to accept Gentiles. God is doing a new and wonderful thing by embracing diversity, but not everyone is onboard right away. There is a great deal of tension.

But, as we have noted, there is to this day — in the church and in the culture around us. Diversity still presents a challenge to us, so much

so that there isn't much of it in most churches, and our politics are increasingly driven by fear of the other. And to be clear, it's not just a philosophical or political difference, it is a theological one with potentially dangerous consequences.

In the 1990's historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. raised a concern about what he called the Balkanization of American society. He feared that tribal interests and ethnic identities would unravel the fragile bond of unity here and lead to the kind of social disintegration experienced in the former Yugoslavia which led to ethnic cleansing. Unless a common purpose binds (us) together," he wrote, "tribal hostilities will drive (us) apart (*The Disuniting of America*, p. 10)."

Writing for the commentary *Feasting on the Word*, published in 2010, pastoral theologian Michael Jenkins adds this. "The great danger of Balkanization lies in any group's lust to power over others, its insistence that its identity alone reflects God's nature and God's way, its demand that the otherness of others be erased from the pages of history or from the face of the earth (Year C, Volume 3, p. 18)." Genocide, ethnic cleansing, holocaust, that is the danger at the end of this road.

It doesn't sound very American. We are a melting pot, a land of immigrants, other than Indigenous Americans. And it certainly isn't the church. On Pentecost, Spirit is poured out on *all people* across all categories of difference as a sign that *all people* will be included in God's realm, and not only will *all people* be included, *all people* will be empowered to lead in this new community bound together by Christ.

When Peter interprets what is happening for the crowd gathered, he quotes the prophet Joel who says, "In the last days, God declares, 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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour my Spirit; and they shall prophesy... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The purpose of it all is as noble as it gets – that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But for this to happen, God's Spirit must be poured out on all - women and men, young and old, slave and free, and obviously people of all ethnicities and nationalities,

everyone! That is God's vision for the church, it is a vision Baptists, at our best, have lived toward, and it is one we reach for here.

We can feel the impulse toward inclusion and diversity in our belonging value which says this.

First Baptist Church strives to be a church where everyone can experience a sense of belonging and connection. We welcome and affirm all people for who they are and who they may become. We provide space for individuals to be true to self and to challenge themselves and others to create community that embraces diversity. Because we believe in the sacred worth of all people as beloved children of God, we invite every person to participate in all aspects of the life, leadership, and ministry of our congregation.

All are welcome and empowered to serve.

We can also sense this impulse in the community banner mounted on the back of the Lewis building. Different-colored hands reach toward a center filled with light, an image with more than one meaning but certainly a representation of how we view community, unity amidst diversity, a place where everyone is welcome and valued.

And we can observe this impulse in the life of our church. We are made up of people of all ages and backgrounds, more nationalities than we can count, various gifts and identities and athletic loyalties... we even welcome Wildcat fans... at least some do. But humor aside, we not only have diversity; we seek it, we see it as a gift because God does.

Perhaps music provides the best analogy. Unison singing can be beautiful, but there is a deeper richness to harmony. It helps to sing the right notes, and blend our voices well, not try to out-sing each other, but there is nothing quite like harmony, four-part or even eight-part as in John Ness Beck's setting of "Upon this Rock."

It is a helpful way to think about the church empowered by Spirit on Pentecost. And it's not just the rich diversity of voices in this church the world can hear when we follow God's design; it's the majestic myriad of voices in the larger body of Christ!