

SERMON TITLE: "The Power of Diversity"  
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-18, 22-24  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 14, 2020, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Just like Christmas and Easter, the Day of Pentecost comes every year. But I'd bet that most people, maybe even most Christians, don't really know when Pentecost is or what it's about. That's why every year I tell anyone who will listen to me that I think Pentecost is the most important Christian holiday. "What?!" they protest. "Surely Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter is the most important day."

"Nope," I reply. "What if Jesus had been born, but no one told that story? Or what if Jesus had been crucified and God raised him from the dead, but no one got the courage to proclaim that excruciating and exhilarating message? What if the disciples had remained too scared to talk? What if they had quietly gone back to fishing and tax collecting instead?"

According to the scriptures, it was the Holy Spirit coming on the Day of Pentecost that made all the difference. When the Spirit of God was poured out on the disciples with fire and wind, that's when the Christians got started talking. And God didn't just get them talking quietly among themselves. No. To the amazement and astonishment of both speakers and hearers, the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to speak in the native languages of the people who had gathered in Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean region.

We began this series of sermons on May 31, which was the actual Day of Pentecost this year. On that day, we talked about the fires of Pentecost and compared them to the fires of protest that have been burning in our American cities. Then last Sunday, as the winds were blowing all around us here in Utah, we talked about the winds of change that are causing Americans to rethink and repent of our part in racial injustice and violence against people of color. Today, I want to focus on a third aspect of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost. I want us to see, hear, and feel the power of diversity.

## **1—DIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES**

We begin first of all with the diversity of languages. Many of those Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians, Libyans, Cyrenians, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs who were in Jerusalem that day were Jewish in religion. So they might have known some Hebrew or Aramaic. But, actually, by then, even the Hebrew scriptures had been translated into Greek, which was the more-common language, from the previous era of the Greek empire. Now that the Romans had conquered the region, Latin was spreading, but it wasn't widely known yet. Traders and highly-educated people would have known more languages, but average folks would have spoken mostly in their own dialects and mother tongues. So, when the Holy Spirit came on the disciples that day, and gave them the amazing and astonishing ability to speak in the various native languages of the people, that diversity resonated with power.

There's a joke I'm sure you've heard before. What do you call a person who speaks two languages? Bi-lingual. What do you call a person who speaks three languages? Tri-lingual. What do you call a person who speaks only one language? American.

Yep, that's us. When my husband Steve and I traveled in Europe in 1998, we quickly realized what a disadvantage it was for us to not know how to speak even the most simple words and phrases in French and German. Figuring out where and when to see tourist attractions, how to use public transportation and get off at the right stops, how to buy something to eat, and even how to use a public restroom were all complicated by our lack of language skills. So it was an amazing relief to us when we finally arrived in Austria and our friends there could speak and translate for us in English. I know that was hard work for them for a whole week, but what a gift it was to us.

I imagine that's what it was like on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. All those immigrants and visitors in Jerusalem were probably struggling to understand what was going on around them--how to get food and shelter, how to work, and how to worship. And then, seemingly out of nowhere comes this gift

of dialects and languages that they could understand. What a refreshing change! What a blessed relief! The power of diversity was palpable.

## **2—DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE**

The wonderful things that happened on the day of Pentecost weren't only the result of diverse languages, however. There was also an amazing diversity of people. We've already reviewed the geographical places from which they came. Likely they brought with them some cultural variations. Maybe they ate different kinds of food, or wore different styles of clothing.

Did any of you see the article in yesterday's *Standard Examiner* about the diversification of clothing standards for Mormon missionaries? Now, *in some places*, the young men will be allowed to wear blue, as well as white, shirts, and they may be allowed to go without a tie. And, *in a few places*, their young women have been allowed to wear pants. These variations aren't just willy nilly. They are changes that may be allowed for cultural and safety reasons.

No matter which religious tradition we belong to, God's work isn't done in just one way. God has always been busy making variety. One statistic that has been interesting to me is that there are 734 different species of frogs in the South American country of Colombia. Yes, 734 different kinds of frogs of all different colors, with polka dots and stripes and many other designs! If we recognize that God has also made human beings diverse *on purpose*, then we can recognize the Christian value in honoring and respecting the power of that human diversity.

The emphasis on diversity may seem like a modern idea, but it's not new. Peter's speech in Acts 2 lifted up the fact that many centuries before, the Old Testament prophet Joel had said that the day was coming when God would pour out the Holy Spirit on all flesh: on sons and daughters, young and old, slaves and free, men and women.

Sure, there were some cynics there in Jerusalem who sneered at what they were seeing and hearing. They derided the disciples of Jesus as being drunk. Just like is so often done, those in high places

tried to squelch the grassroots movement and dismiss their powerful groundswell of diversity by calling it names. Think of the 75-year old peaceful protester in Buffalo who was pushed to the ground and given a brain injury and then called “an antifa provocateur,” as if that false label would justify the police brutality against him. Or think of the protesters in other cities, who have been called “domestic terrorists,” even though their actions have been peaceful and in accordance with their constitutional rights. But Peter wouldn’t allow such derisive and dismissive name-calling to stand unchallenged. So he spoke the facts. They can’t be drunk, he said, for it’s only 9:00 in the morning. No, these amazing events are not due to drunkenness, said Peter. What you see and hear is coming from God. God’s Holy Spirit is coming among us through the power of diversity.

### **3—APPLICATION TODAY**

If the Holy Spirit came through the power of diversity at the time of Pentecost described in Acts 2, then how can the Holy Spirit come through the power of diversity today?

Well, I definitely think we should stop being afraid of diversity, and we should actively seek diversification as a means of strength for our common good. As I was reading this week about police relationships with people of color here in the Ogden area, I came across the information that, in January, the Ogden Police Department had 143 officers. Not one of those officers was black. Police Chief Watts admitted that this was a problem, and he indicated he and his department were trying to recruit officers of color.<sup>1</sup> But, apparently, Ogden isn’t a very friendly place for such officers to live and work. No one wants to be a token, who is blamed by each side of a conflict.

Diversity done right isn’t easy. This past week, I read an article from *The Salt Lake Tribune* that referred to a research study done by professors at Brigham Young University. The study analyzed the rate at which women speak up and are heard in mixed-gender groups. Whether college student groups, church groups, workplace groups, or the U.S. Congress, the researchers found that it didn’t matter. If women were a minority in the group, their voices would not be heard. Their comments would be

interrupted, and cut short. Their opinions would be denigrated. The larger the proportion of women in the group, the more likely their perspectives would be valued. In this particular study, however, it wasn't until the women had a supermajority—four out of five positions in the group—that the women participants were taken seriously enough that the women actually felt comfortable to express their opinions at an equal level with the men.<sup>2</sup>

Wow! And these results weren't only in situations that were outrightly hostile toward women. The research was done in settings where both the women and the men liked their groups. What the study proved, therefore, was that prejudice, bias, and discrimination can be so subtle that no one even realizes it is there. It's like an invisible and tasteless poison in the air we breathe and the water we drink. It's like sign seen at a protest in Salt Lake City on Friday night. The sign proclaimed, "Utah! The nicest racism you'll ever experience!"<sup>3</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The anti-racism protests across our country in recent weeks are the result of explicit and blatant racism, on the one hand, and, on the other, unconscious and implicit biases that we Americans don't even realize we have. What the protests in the streets are telling us is that the time for blindness and deafness is over. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said more than once, "Riots are the language of the unheard."

It's time for us to hear the voices of those who have been afraid to speak or who have been dismissed as radicals or who have been ignored or threatened into silence. In this Pentecost season, it's time now for people of Christian faith to open our ears to the multiple languages and diverse voices of the Holy Spirit. It's time for us to stand and kneel and vote with those who are marching in our streets. God is calling us to become a part of the power of diversity.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.standard.net/news/government/ogden-police-chief-watt-force-hasnt-made-the-strides-hed-like-in-diversification/article\\_539ae506-e4f3-579b-b76a-e44721f0ea08.html](https://www.standard.net/news/government/ogden-police-chief-watt-force-hasnt-made-the-strides-hed-like-in-diversification/article_539ae506-e4f3-579b-b76a-e44721f0ea08.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/when-women-dont-speak/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://saltlakatribune-ut.newsmemory.com/?token=2fed2fb3e317e675bccfe24ba5dd87c3\\_5ee4e880\\_fd167b0&selDate=20200613&goTo=A01&artid=4](https://saltlakatribune-ut.newsmemory.com/?token=2fed2fb3e317e675bccfe24ba5dd87c3_5ee4e880_fd167b0&selDate=20200613&goTo=A01&artid=4)