

**“Renew the Face of the Earth,” Pentecost, June 4, 2017,
First Presbyterian, Marshfield** Texts: Num.11:24-
30;Ps.104:24-34,35b.;1 Cor.12:3b-13; Acts 2:1-21

We Presbyterians usually do not expect anything extraordinary to happen in worship. We have long been noted for doing everything with “decency and order.” Sometimes we do not leave much room for the work of the Spirit, or for genuine transformation. When we hear the Pentecost story, maybe we should change our expectations. Annie Dillard, in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, says: “On the whole, I do not find Christians...sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

According to Acts, Jesus’ disciples were gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, as Jesus had instructed them, when the Holy Spirit struck like wind and fire. They were so excited and inspired that observers thought they were drunk, at 9:00 in the morning!

Pentecost, or Shavuot, is one of the three pilgrimage holidays in the Jewish calendar. It gets its name because it comes fifty days after Passover. It originally was a celebration of the winter grain harvest; since Israel has a Mediterranean climate, most of the crops grow in the winter, when the rains fall. The celebration of the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai was eventually added to the festival. An early commentary on the events of Sinai has a great resemblance to the Pentecost story; when the Torah was given to Moses, it was accompanied by wind and fire. The Ten Commandments were heard in seventy languages so that each nation received them in its own tongue. The story from Acts is a transformation of the original giving of the law. As John Calvin remarked, if the gospel had been proclaimed at Pentecost in only one language, the recipients would not have understood its universal intent.

Pentecost is a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in which languages were scrambled. It is a transformation bringing all people back together again, as God intended. God seeks unity in diversity. We are all called to be one, to love one another, without losing the richness of our diverse cultures and languages, even our diverse ways of worship.

The languages in the Pentecost story are interpreted in two ways: Pentecostal and charismatic churches see the disciples' speech as ecstatic, speaking in tongues, not in ordinary languages. Though there are references to the use of ecstatic language as a spiritual gift elsewhere in Acts and especially in 1 Corinthians 12-14, on this occasion, the disciples seem to be speaking in the known languages of the world. Jews from the diaspora would have been in Jerusalem for Pentecost, but the language groups listed included Gentiles as well as Jews, so it is even more inclusive.

The Pentecost story is a mission statement for the early church as described in the Book of Acts. The book is about the spread of the gospel to all people throughout the Mediterranean basin and the Roman Empire, the known world

at that time. The stories tell how Paul and his associates shared the gospel with all kinds of people, both Jews and Gentiles. No one was excluded. As Paul said in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Peter's sermon at Pentecost is based on the prophet Joel 2:28-32. It, too, is very inclusive. The Spirit is poured out on all people, including male and female, young and old, slave and free.

It seems to be part of the human condition that we want to gather in tribes. We tend to associate with people like us, especially in worship. As Martin Luther King, Jr., noted, Sunday morning is often the most segregated hour of the week. Often, when we feel threatened or fearful, as seems to be the case with many today in our world, especially since 9-11 and other terrorist attacks, we tend to scapegoat others that are different from us. We sometimes think that blaming those who are different will keep us safe. People tend to scapegoat women, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, immigrants, especially Hispanics, and

African Americans, Native Americans, Muslims; in short, anybody who is not like us.

The Pentecost story says that the gospel is for all people, for the whole world, indeed for the whole creation. The first creation story in Genesis, vs.27-28, says that all humankind is created in the image of God, and that we are called to be good stewards of the creation. The word used in Genesis is "dominion." Some have interpreted that to mean that the earth is ours to use for our own purposes and that we can take what we want for ourselves. Combined with the idea that God's kingdom will come and the earth will be destroyed, they think that creation care is not part of our calling. As our situation changes and we see the devastation that humans can cause in creation, even many evangelical Christians are coming to emphasize creation care. Katherine Hayhoe, a Southern Baptist scientist, has been promoting creation care and addressing of climate change. We have an opportunity in the fall to have a guest, the Rev. Michael Dowd, who also addresses the relationship between stewardship of the environment, our interpretation of scripture, and our faith.

Psalm 104, part of which we read for our call to worship, also shows how the Spirit has given life to the diversity of creation, of which we are a part. I especially like the way v. 25-26 injects a little humor into creation care, showing how the sea, the source of chaos for the early Hebrews, is tamed and made into God's playground. Leviathan, the sea monster, frolicks like a friendly dolphin.

The Holy Spirit transforms our human ways, including care for our neighbors and for the creation. An alternate text for Pentecost, last year, is Romans 8:14-17, 22-27. Through the guidance of the Spirit, we humans, in all our diversity, are adopted as children of God. The whole creation is groaning for God's transformation. We and the creation wait for God's adoption and redemption. The reign of God is to come to a new heaven and a new *earth!* The Spirit helps us to pray. We don't have to know how to put our prayers into beautiful language, but the Spirit will guide us. So we need to treat all other humans as our neighbors, to be loved by God and each other. And we are to care for the creation, including other creatures and the earth itself. In our human ways, we have believed that God gave us dominion over the earth so we

could exploit it for our own use. But some of us are beginning to see how our overuse of fossil fuels and our failure to care for the environment is resulting in more extreme weather, drought and flood, melting of the Arctic and glaciers worldwide, and other effects of human caused climate change. The pope, in his encyclical of last year, has promoted the need for creation care as part of our faith and our legacy to the future. We all want to leave a better planet for our children and grandchildren, as we are called to do.

Our second reading for today, from 1 Corinthians 12, addresses the different gifts of the Spirit that are given to the members of the body of Christ, the church. As I mentioned earlier, some in the Corinthian church valued the gift of tongues over other gifts of the spirit. We need discernment, knowledge, the ability to teach, to heal, to interpret scripture, to be compassionate, and many other gifts. As we have heard many times during the time we have been without a called pastor, we are all called to ministry by our baptism. We have the gifts, and we need to minister to one another, not only during this time but when we have a called pastor.

In this time of the decline of the institutional church, we need to be open to changes in the way that we do things. It has often been said that the seven last words of the church are “we never did it that way before.” The late Phyllis Tickle wrote a book saying that we are in the midst of one of the great reformations of the church, which come along about every 500 years. This is the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and it seems to be the time for a new reformation, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is a time for renewal. It is a time to develop enthusiasm for our faith, to be open to the new things that the Holy Spirit is trying to do in our churches and our lives. It is a time to recognize the unity and diversity of all people, to open our churches to a variety of new people, not simply those who are like us. It is a time to be concerned for the stewardship of all creation. Jesus promised us in the Gospel of John that when he was no longer among us in a physical way, showing us what God is like, that the Holy Spirit, the comforter, would be with us guiding us to a new and transformed life. Come, Holy Spirit!

Rev. Janet Wolfe