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Manchester United Methodist Church
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“Lessons from the First Pentecost”
Acts 2: 1-21, John 7: 37-39

On this Pentecost weekend, it's well that you know that yesterday afternoon we confirmed into the church a group of 72 young people. It was a glorious, wonderful event and a day full of joy for them and their families. But the addition of these young people to the confirmed membership in the church of Jesus Christ is not only an important day for them and their families, but for our whole congregation.

Well, today is “Happy Birthday Church” or for Spanish speakers among you, “Feliz Cumpleaños Iglesia”. This is the traditional day to celebrate the birth of the church of Jesus Christ. Now without thinking hard about it and without examining the scriptures, you might think that Easter is the birthday of the church. But across the centuries, the church has understood this Pentecost day, this 50th day after Easter, the day that was described from the reading of Acts that we heard earlier, that this is the real day when the church was given birth. According to Luke, for the first weeks after the resurrection, those who had known and followed Jesus, those who had seen him as the risen Christ, stayed in Jerusalem and waited for the time when God would make God's plans for them clear.

Then, one day, as it says in the book of Acts, there were a great number of them gathered together in one place and it seemed suddenly like a rush of a mighty wind came among those gathered who had known Jesus and upon them were tongues of fire. They were given the ability to speak in the languages of all the nations of the world, it said.

Pentecost is the day that undoes the tower of Babel. In that Old Testament story, the languages of humanity were confused so that people would not understand each other. On Pentecost, the church was born with the ability to communicate with all the peoples of the world. It was from that point forward that the church's mission to the world was launched. For all these centuries we've celebrated Pentecost with red as a way of reminding us of the fire-like intensity of the day. And, for all those centuries, we have celebrated this day as the birthday of the church.

This morning, I want us to think about the things that happened on that birthday. The events of that day marked the church for what it is and what it should be. In looking at the characteristics of the first Pentecost, we learn what the church was meant to be in the beginning and what we should be today.

First, I want us to remember that from its birthday, the church of Jesus Christ was an international and multi-ethnic movement. This was the whole point of all those various languages that were heard on the first Pentecost. On that birthday of the church, the languages of every nation of the world were heard. The text in Acts gives us a long list of examples, not a list meant to be an exclusive list of all the languages that were heard, but rather an example of the breadth of the languages of humanity that were included in the birth of the church.

For most of us, our experience of the church is far too limited. We think of the church mostly in terms of our own congregation. Or at most, we think of the church in terms of our own nation, our own language group. That's our experience. That's how we have lived the church. That is the experience of our lives. But friends, our life experience in that regard doesn't help us see the truth of the church, rather it tends to obscure the real truth of the church from us. The church of Jesus Christ is international, multi-ethnic, touching all races, all lands, all language groups.

When we worship today, we are just a tiny part of something that reaches to every corner of the world. The brother and sisterhood of Jesus Christ is not limited to folks who speak our language, or share our nation, or racial group. Rather our brother and sisterhood in Jesus Christ stretches to every corner of humanity. Wherever and whenever anyone says Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, they become for us - part of our family.

I'm thankful that our United Methodist Church at least has some small way that it represents the universalism of the gospel. Too often we think of the United Methodist Church in terms of our experience which is local or national. It is important to know that there are United Methodist folks, part of our denomination, people that are as connected to us as anyone here in this room now, that are worshiping around the globe. There's a major portion of United Methodism in the Philippines. There is a United Methodist church presence in the form of about 60 or 70 congregations in Russia. United Methodists in Russia. The continent of Africa is strewn with United Methodist congregations. Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the Scandinavian countries have United Methodist churches scattered here and there. You will find United Methodist congregations and people in Poland and Hungary and Switzerland. You will find them in Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, and in the Congo. All of these congregations and all of these people are as much a part of our church as we are.

As a denomination, we seek to be a church that is a Pentecost church. Just as the church from its birthday was international and multi-ethnic, so we seek to be today. But let us confess, that all too often, our congregations in this country are far too the same - the same color, same socioeconomic group, same language. In our sameness, we don't represent the gospel. In some measure, we deny it. One of our great tasks, as individuals and as a congregation, is to say to the world that in Jesus Christ, there is no east or west. In Jesus Christ, there is no north or south. In Jesus Christ, there is no African, Asian, European, American. There is only one body in Christ. It was that way from the birthday of the church and God means it to be that way today.

Second, I think it is important to learn from this birthday of the church that outreach and evangelism are part of the DNA of the gospel. This business of people in all these different language groups hearing the gospel in their language on Pentecost is a way of saying to us that from the very first day, the church of Jesus Christ was a missionary institution. It was a missionary movement. The purpose of having all those languages spoken wasn't simply to be impressive. The purpose of that multiple language day of Pentecost was that the good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ would be declared to people in ways that they could hear and understand. Pentecost, the birthday of the church, was the first day of the evangelical mission of the church to all the world.

We have a mission, given on Pentecost, to speak the word of the love of God in Jesus Christ to everyone who does not know it. We have a mission to do that individually. We do that with a steeple on top of our building. We proclaim Christ with a sign in front of the church. We speak of the love of God in Jesus Christ through newspaper or television commercials. In a multitude of ways, we have an unending task of inviting the world to our family, inviting all of humanity into fellowship of Jesus Christ. This evangelistic impulse is written on the very DNA of the church in the first day. From the very first day, we were trying to speak the word of Christ to everyone.

I wonder, how do you feel you're doing? How do you feel you are participating in this mission to draw all the world to Christ? How are we doing corporately as the church or are we doing everything we can? In all the things we say to the world, are we saying there is a hope, there is a purpose, there is a love, there is a new day coming in Christ? To be the church, we must be that sort of people.

Finally, Pentecost says to us that the power to do these things comes not from us, but from God through the Holy Spirit. We have to confess, don't we, that we're not good at welcoming everyone. We are plagued by all the human barriers, all the human prejudices that infect the world with the diseases that separate races and nations from another. The power to become inclusive, the power to

reach out to everyone is something that we don't find in ourselves. We are given that power by God in the Holy Spirit as it was in the first Pentecost. The courage, the boldness, the pizzaz to say to the new family moving in next to us, "Could I pick you up and take you to my church next Sunday?" That boldness doesn't necessarily come from us, but is a gift of God, a power given to us by the Holy Spirit. When we imagine a way we can use the internet or webcasting or some other technology to share the gospel with the whole region around us, that imagination and power are not our own, but are a gift of the spirit.

My friends, let us hope, let us pray, let us open ourselves to the rush of the mighty spring wind of Pentecost. May those characteristics that marked and shaped and identified the church from its birthday mark, shape and identify us in our day. Amen.