

When I was a student chaplain leading an ecumenical campus ministry for a small college in Arkansas back in 1996 the students and I came up with the theme of “unity in diversity” to remind us that we were one in Christ despite coming from many different theological and denominational backgrounds. When we worshiped, and served together, it didn’t matter where we came from (whether we were Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterian or Unitarian), it mattered that we were seeking God in Christ together. An I will never forget one of the most beautiful moments we had as an ecumenical Christian group – it occurred when we invited a Muslim student to come and talk to us and teach us about prayer in the tradition of Islam. We had our most conservative Christians along with our most liberal-minded Christians all sitting together and listening to a young man speak about prayer as a dedicated Muslim and we were all moved by it. The students asked him powerful questions and as we later unpacked our time with this young man in the weeks that followed, we realized that we could disagree with him and with one another on all sorts of things but we could still respect and love one another. This is what unity and diversity looked like on that campus. And today, being Pentecost in our calendar- the day when we celebrate the pouring out of God’s Holy Spirit upon Christ’s followers following Jesus’ ascension – is one of the best possible times to celebrate our unity in our diversity in the Kingdom of God that calls us to love one another across our differences. Separately, our differences are too diverse to list, but put together, our individual uniqueness creates the beautiful patchwork quilt we call the Body of Christ. And so we are indeed “one” in Christ in the midst of our diversity.

This message, I believe, is more important than ever in our world today as we continue to see people and nations torn apart by racism, prejudice, sexism, classism, and religious intolerance. We in the US have become a culture of incredible polarization, an us-versus-them, where the “other” is to be feared and never trusted. This is nothing new, but one would have hoped that humanity would have learned from its past mistakes. Yet here we are in 2017 repeating history again with all its tragic consequences. Just note some of the news from this past week: Two Oregon men died defending a pair of high school girls from a train passenger’s bigoted taunts. A noose was found hanging inside a shrine to black history in the nation’s capital. And a vandal spray-painted a racial slur at a home of one of sport’s biggest icons. And these are just the latest high-profile examples of hate crimes that have jarred the country in recent months.

On Pentecost, we are reminded that God’s Holy Spirit is given freely to all people regardless of race, culture, socioeconomic standing, gender or any other distinguishing marks used by people to differentiate one person from another. So, if there is any place where the climate of division, polarization and hatred should cease, it is in the Church. And yet as hate crimes and bigotry rise, we hear calls from some Christian leaders to dig deeper the trenches of violence in the Name of Christ. Dave Daubinmire, a popular speaker with his own webcast, recently said “The only thing that is going to save Western civilization is a more aggressive, a more violent Christianity” and “That should be the heart cry of Christian men.... From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of God has suffered violence and violent men take it by force.” Mr. Daubinmire doesn’t seem to realize he is actually reversing the meaning of this Biblical passage by twisting it into a call to violence rather than a condemnation of it. We seem to be entering a new era of extremism, violent extreme Christianity- and it is downright scary. So, let me add my voice to the mix along with anyone that cares to join me to absolutely denounce this as the message of Christ and his Church.

Just look at our passage in Acts 2 to be reminded of God’s vision-on the day of Pentecost. People had gathered in Jerusalem from all corners of the Roman Empire. They represented competing economic interests, diverse cultures, a myriad of languages and different religious traditions. Nevertheless, God’s grace was given freely to all who heard the message preached that day, and thousands embraced the Good News. The gift of tongues that was bestowed upon Jesus followers at Pentecost, whereby people could hear and understand the message of the Gospel for the first time, was exactly the opposite of what occurred in the Tower of Babel story: at the Tower of Babel, no one could understand anything anyone was saying because they were all speaking different unknown languages that created misunderstanding and chaos, resulting in disunity. But on the day of Pentecost, everyone could understand clearly what was being said because the different languages spoken were known to the listeners and so this diversity actually created understanding and order, resulting in unity.

The many immigrants and foreigners who had converged on Jerusalem that day returned to their homes and spread the Gospel message of love and grace and the church began to spread like a wildfire throughout the world. From its very inception, the church was an intensely diverse group of people who hailed from a variety of cultures and languages. And it

was in the midst of this great and incredible diversity that God sent the Holy Spirit upon the church and started a movement that would change the history of the world forever.

The message of Christ hasn't changed, but those who claim to be his followers have too often failed to live up to that message or even proclaim the message itself. Today it is being twisted into all manner of false constructs. The greatest temptation facing Christians today is not losing our passion, but believing that grasping for power is our calling. The way of the cross is not the way of violence or hatred but of truth telling, sacrificial love for the sins of the world.

The Holy Spirit is given freely, without respect for citizenship, race, background, or socio-economic class, and God continues today to pour out the Holy Spirit upon all humanity. On the day of Pentecost, we saw the vision of the prophet Joel come to pass in the creation of the Church saying: "In the last days 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 out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

The Holy Spirit works as a transformative agent and Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit as the giver of truth- whose fruits are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control. And so, just to be really clear, this list of fruits of the Holy Spirit does not include hatred, violence, power, or control of others. The fruits are the qualities of Jesus that the Holy Spirit develops in our lives as we grow in faith. Just as the disciples' bold and fearless witness at Pentecost led to more than 3,000 people embracing the Good News, so we are called to bear witness of God's love for the world today. The Holy Spirit compels us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors (which in Jesus' words includes our enemies) as ourselves to bestow the radical gift of grace upon all even those who don't deserve it (remembering that we don't deserve grace either). We do this when we reach out to the unloved, the hard to love, and the rejected. Whenever we approach the Eucharistic table, we are reminded of God's love for us, knowing that we have all been accepted as living members of our Savior, no matter who we are, and are all fed with spiritual food. Just as the Holy Spirit was poured out on peoples of every language and race at Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit today continues to draw people from every culture, language, race, nation, socio-economic status, political

persuasion, and ethnicity into the family of God. Pentecost is an awe-inspiring day of joy and celebration of God's love and grace. Through the Holy Spirit, we welcome strangers into our midst and we become one family as we embrace our unity in diversity by God's grace. Amen.