

When I was a chaplain leading an ecumenical campus ministry for a small liberal arts college in Arkansas, the students and I thought a lot about our theme at the beginning of the year. They described having faced factions between the religious groups and so we decided on the theme of “unity in diversity” to remind us that we were one in God as people of faith, despite coming from many different theological and denominational backgrounds. When we worshiped and served together on building projects and built a house with Habitat for Humanity, we noticed it didn’t matter what our background was, it mattered that we were seeking God’s will for our lives together. It was a wonderful, beautiful year for all of us and a deep sense of community developed. Memories of that experience still inspire me. A similar thing happened when I was serving as a missionary in Chiang Mai, Thailand as a young adult. At that time, there was one big church for all the Americans in the area, and we came from as diverse of backgrounds as you could imagine – yet you would never know it as we stood side by side and sang hymns, read Scripture, and took Communion. I taught the Sunday School classes and all the children had the same lessons each week from the Bible. We were very much aware that back in the states these families would be attending very different kinds of churches but in Chiang Mai, we were one body - from Baptist to Presbyterian to Pentecostal to Lutheran. These experiences formed me and gave me a sense of hope and the belief that what separates us is far less important or even interesting than what unifies us.

But that hope has been severely tested these past few years. I have to wonder – has the politicized religion we see throughout our nation so infiltrated society that those Americans who once worshipped and served together can no longer worship together in Chiang Mai? Has that college campus ministry now broken off into isolated factions again, no longer able to serve side by side? It’s very possible. I want better for my children and as we acknowledge our graduates today, I want better for them too...perhaps they will move us to a new and different, more unified path.

But it’s very difficult because we are surrounded by hatred and violence on all sides with mass shootings occurring at an almost daily rate. Like most of us, I am still reeling from the shooting in Uvalde and the images of the children who died keeps flashing through my mind. A group of elementary children walked past me here in La Jolla this week and my first thought was, “Oh no, they’re so vulnerable out here in the open.” When I dropped off my children at their elementary school this week, I found myself wondering if all the doors were locked and questioned what the school office staff do if someone charged inside that open and unlocked door with an assault rifle? I think of Buffalo, Tulsa, and the Presbyterian church in Orange County. The images from Ukraine haunt me, like the photo of the pregnant woman in labor on a stretcher who died after the maternity ward was bombed. I could go on. But I won’t. We have certain images that stick with us.

And while I may be shocked by it, I know I shouldn’t be surprised. History reminds us that tragedy and terrible violence is part of our human story. Scripture tells similar stories and reminds us repeatedly that we are dealing with very real and devastating evil - indeed – this is the whole reason the cross and resurrection are so central and powerful – because evil did not and will never triumph over the power of God at work in Christ. This week the Daily Office lectionary is walking us through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and we read in chapter 6, “Put on the armor of God. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” And this verse is our theme for Vacation Bible School this year.

And then we come to today – this wonderful feast day in the Church calendar – the day of Pentecost. We read in Acts 2 that on this day, people gathered in Jerusalem from all corners of the Roman Empire. They represented competing economic interests, diverse cultures, a myriad of languages and many different religious traditions. Nevertheless, God’s

grace was given freely to all who heard the Gospel message preached that day. The gift of tongues that was bestowed upon Jesus followers in that upper room didn't stay there – it spread to everyone who could hear it – in such a way people could understand it in their own language for the first time. This event is 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, which resulted in chaos and disunity. But on the day of Pentecost, everyone could understand clearly what was being said, resulting in unity and an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. So on this day the Church proclaims a message of unity in diversity – a love that triumphs over hatred and division. Like the prophet Joel predicted, God really has poured out the Holy Spirit upon all people – no matter who we are – class doesn't matter, gender doesn't matter, age doesn't matter, status doesn't matter....we are all able to receive this amazing gift of God.

Imagine all those immigrants and foreigners who converged on Jerusalem that day returning to their homes to spread the Gospel message: The Church was born in incredibly diversity and was carried throughout the world. Since its inception, the church has been an intensely diverse group of people, hailing from a variety of cultures and languages. And it was in the midst of this great diversity, God's Spirit was poured out and changed the history of the world forever...bringing strangers into the fellowship and love of God.

The message hasn't changed, but those who claim to be Jesus' followers have often failed to live up to this incredible truth and message. Perhaps one of the greatest temptations facing Christians today is losing sight of the lessons of Pentecost – recognizing there is no Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, nor slave nor free...we are all One in Christ. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit- whose fruits are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control.

Just as the Holy Spirit was poured out on peoples of every language at Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit

today continues to draw people from every culture, language, tribe, race, nation, socio-economic status, political persuasion, gender, age, class, and ethnicity into the family of God. It is possible, through the power of the Spirit, to live and proclaim our unity in diversity and to overcome evil, violence and hatred with God's help – with God's Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God.