

On All People

Acts 2:1-21

Day of Pentecost/ 5th June 2022

Last Sunday evening, Mark and I were back in Washington, D.C. We decided to walk to the Lincoln Memorial and along the National Mall, a fitting place on Memorial Day weekend. As we approached the Lincoln Memorial from the northwest side, we turned to the right and saw the area full of people – walking, biking, just sitting on the steps looking toward the east, people talking, laughing, smiling, a marvelous diversity of people, black, brown, white, speaking different languages, happy to be there. We walked up those majestic steps weaving through the people toward the enormous sculpture of Abraham Lincoln, reaching the landing where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” Speech – the exact location is carved in the marble. Ascending the steps, we reached the top and walked through the columns into the great hall. It, too, was full of people. Beautiful people. “Shiny happy people.”¹ All God’s people, brown and black and white, all ages, young and old, all shapes and sizes and styles of dress, smiling, talking in many languages, wandering around the space.

Some were at the south wall reading the Gettysburg Address; others were at the north wall reading Lincoln’s deeply theological Second Inaugural Address. “With malice toward none,” he said, “with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” Most people were gathered in front of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, to have their picture taken with him. We noticed one family, perhaps Indian or Pakistani, trying to take a selfie. I walked over and said, “Here, would you like me to take a picture of you together?” And the gentlemen smiled and said, “Yes, thank you.” They gathered together and smiled. And I returned the phone. And then we noticed another family, and Mark went over and offered to take their picture. And there was an African-American family about to take a selfie, and I went over and said, “May I?” And there was a white family, and we did the same. And a Latino family. A couple here. Another couple there. We roamed through the crowd saying, “May I?” “May I?” There was a young man, a Sikh, smiling with his young daughter, maybe seven or eight, smiling, beaming with joy.

We then stood there, leaning against the columns, watching this rainbow of people at the feet of Father Abraham, all held in his bosom, “shiny happy people” who were grateful to be there. This is America. Greater still, this is *God’s* vision for humanity, for the Church, and beyond it. There was something beautiful and amazing happening there at that moment. It was as if the Spirit was hovering over us all. Then these words came to mind, “And I will pour out my Spirit upon all peoples” (Acts 2:17). And I thought of Pentecost. This was a Pentecostal moment, a moment of sharing and joining together. Isn’t this what Pentecost truly means? A vision of what can be and, at moments, truly is: a pouring out of the Spirit upon all people, all nations, beyond the walls of the Church, the Spirit who allows us to connect and relate, to share and to join, to speak many languages and hear the liberating word of God, a Spirit who continues to liberate and heal and renew our hearts. It’s what God desires for this nation, every nation, and all people. That was a Holy Spirit moment for me.

Pentecost is sometimes called the “birthday of the church.” I remember how we always had a birthday cake on Pentecost in my home church. “A great wind howls from the skies, flames blaze above the heads of Jesus’s followers, and a huge crowd hears the Word of God in their own

languages,” as Diana Butler Bass beautifully describes that event. She also reminds us that it’s “the birth of something much bigger—the birth of a new humanity, a new creation. ‘In the last days,’ God declares, ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon *all flesh*.’”²

All flesh. Not just some people. Literally, in the Greek, “the whole of human nature” or “every physical body.”³ “In the last days it will be,” the prophet Joel told us long ago, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour my Spirit upon all people, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people will see visions and your old people shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit...” (Joel 2:28-30; Acts 2:17-21). Upon Jews and Gentiles. Upon Parthians and Medes and Elamites and people of Mesopotamia and Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, visitors from Rome, Cretans, and Arabs, in other words, everyone.

What started with a particular people, God’s Spirit alive in Israel is now being unleashed and poured out upon everyone. It’s multicultural. Multilingual. The Spirit pours over the multitudes; the Spirit moves under and around and through all that separates us from God, breaking down barriers and removing obstacles that hinder communicating and hearing the voice of God. The Spirit pours, the Spirit flows, and the Spirit moves. The Spirit joins, unites, and pushes us, as theologian Catherine Keller says, “toward new ways of knowing-together, of God-talking together.”⁴

It’s a remarkable vision that we’re given in this story. And you have to wonder: how did we, especially the Church, get so much wrong in our history, sidetracked by the forces of cultural dominance and superiority, racism, and white supremacy? Pentecost is, after all, anti-racist!

I love how contemporary African-American theologian Willie James Jennings, who teaches at Yale Divinity School, reflects on this text: “The same Spirit that was there from the beginning, hovering, brooding in the joy of creation of the universe and of each one of us, who knows us together and separately in our most intimate places, has announced the divine intention through the Son to reach into our lives and make each life a site of speaking glory. But this will require bodies that reach across massive and real boundaries, cultural, religious, and ethnic. It will require a commitment born of Israel’s faith, but reaching to depths of relating beyond what any devotion to Israel’s God had heretofore been recognized as requiring: devotion to peoples unknown and undesired. What God had always spoken to Israel now God speaks even more loudly in the voices of the many to the many: *join them!* Now the love of neighbor will take on pneumatological [, that is, Spirit-dimensions]. It will be love that builds directly out of the resurrected body of Jesus. This is the love that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed it will drive the disciples forward into the world and drive a question into their lives [—and ours—] Where is the Holy Spirit taking us, and into whose lives?”⁵

You can understand why this experience was baffling and confusing for those looking on. They’re obviously drunk, as the crowd says, the skeptics (Acts 2:15). But now Peter knows better; he’s no longer denying what God is up to in Jesus and now through his Spirit. Even here, though, Peter has absolutely no idea just how bold and radical and life-changing this Spirit will be in his life, in the Church, and in the world! But he’s trusting the Spirit. And then he voices this prophecy from Joel. Joel’s vision, his dream proclaims a new world order energized by the movement of the Holy Spirit, breaking through on all flesh and destroying social orders, joining disparate people together, and inaugurating a new order of the Spirit.⁶

We are heirs of *this* work. This is what the Church becomes through the power and presence of the Spirit, who joins us together, who brings new people into the community, young and old alike, wildly diverse, brought together to be the body of Christ, embodying a love that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned. Where is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives? This is the question that should always be before us. *Come, Holy Spirit. Come!*



Image: Pentecost by Edward de Guzman, Wellshire Presbyterian Church, Denver, CO.

¹ I'm thinking here of the song "Shiny Happy People" by the American rock band R.E. M., from the Out of Time (1991) album.

² Diana Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings*, June 5, 2022: https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-e21?r=45vbf&s=w&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web.

³ Bass.

⁴ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 163.

⁵ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 32.

⁶ Jennings, 35.