

Highland Presbyterian Church
1011 Cherokee Road
Louisville, Kentucky

May 11, 2008

Day of Pentecost

The Reverend Dr. Fairfax Fullerton Fair

One Spirit, One Baptism

Acts 2:1-21
I Corinthians 12:3b-13

Now that he is grown – handsome, poised, and articulate -- Margaret admits that when she first held her baby boy she prayed, “Dear Lord, please make him smart, because he sure is ugly.”

What gifts are ours? Some have tact, some have beauty, some have smarts. Some have the ability to engineer, others have the creativity to teach. God gives all of us different gifts – intelligence, perfect pitch, agility – and calls us to pool our gifts for the benefit of all. Our giftedness is not cause for conceit, because our strengths are gifts, after all, for which we can take no credit. We neither deserve nor earn them. They allow us no room for the big head, no justification for ego trips. Nor are our gifts intended to be hoarded for our own use or kept under wraps due to shyness or insecurity. They are to be set alongside the gifts of others so that the composite is a multi-faceted whole which brings honor and glory to God in service to God’s people.

At one time or another, almost all of us have tried to parent, learn a sport, or learn to cook. Each of these endeavors, like so many others, requires us to do many different things simultaneously. Feed, burp, diaper, and rock a newborn while cooking supper, doing laundry, and keeping a three-year old from accenting the dog’s coat with bright spots of finger paint or experimenting with pretzel sticks and electrical outlets. Get the racquet back, rotate the shoulders, transfer weight from the back foot to the front, all while keeping one’s eye on the ball. Pre-heat the oven, separate the egg whites, and sauté the onions, all while the yeast rolls rise and the wild rice boils. The results are less than optimal if any step does not happen, if any piece of the whole is missing.

Similarly, the proper functioning of the human body requires a number of parts to work in concert with one another. When one’s left knee is gimpy, the right knee is subjected to extra strain. When one’s skin is badly burned, infection

can ravage the whole body. When the pancreas is affected by diabetes, a toll may be taken on one's eyes and kidneys.

The body of Christ, like the human body, is complex. Like the coordination necessary to play a sport or to entertain dinner guests, the body of Christ requires the coordinated use of a multiplicity of gifts to continue the work of Jesus Christ among us, for us, and for all. In our diversity, we have the capacity to accomplish more than we ever could alone. Through our baptism in the one Spirit, we are given unity of purpose.

Baptisms take place in many settings. One Sunday afternoon a preacher got a phone call at home from an anxious church member. She was the mother of an eight-year old son, Jacob. "Preacher," the mother said, "Jacob has been reading that Bible the church gave him and he decided he wanted to be baptized. My husband just jumped in the swimming pool with him and held him under water for a minute, then pronounced him dunked in the Spirit. Do you think he is baptized?"

We Presbyterians often get accused of dry cleaning, with the light sprinkling of water commonly used in baptisms in our churches. In churches of other denominations there are large tanks of water where the pastor and the one to be baptized can stand waist deep and in full view of the congregation. Wannabe members in some churches still traipse down to a nearby creek and wade in the water. Unbeknownst to many parents, their children born in Catholic hospitals may be baptized before they have their first meal of mother's milk.

Yes, baptisms take place in varied settings. Some people profess faith to receive the sacrament of initiation into the Christian church; others are baptized on the faith of their parents, who promise to help them learn the faith and how it is practiced, to nurture them in the faith until they reach an age when they can profess faith for themselves.

Christians the world over are baptized in the name of the trinitarian God we worship -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- yet services of baptism can vary widely. Some people are baptized in raucous revivals, while others receive the sacrament in quiet, Saturday afternoon affairs in private homes. Some are baptized in lace gowns handed down through generations, others in the native garb of their tribes. Some have godparents. Some are among a dozen people all receiving the sacrament at the same time. Each celebration of the sacrament is unique, yet each is an act of God, efficacious by God's Spirit and not dependent upon human liturgy or performance.

A church had been rocked by scandal. The pastor had resigned in disgrace, then given up his ordination rather than have his misdeeds aired publicly. A distressed man made an appointment with the interim pastor. "Is my baptism still valid, in light of all we now know about the one who baptized me?"

The good news is that the Spirit is active in baptism regardless of who the human actor is. Baptism is a once-for-all act of grace by the Holy Spirit who comes upon us and dwells with us again and again.

On this day when we celebrate the gift of God's Spirit poured out upon all people, we are called to be cognizant of the Spirit's all-inclusive reach. Just as those gathered in Jerusalem heard the gospel preached in every tongue, we, too, must remember that our way of hearing is not the only way and our spiritual practice is not the only avenue for the Spirit's action. We may be caught by surprise by the way the Spirit unifies today's disparate world, just as were those from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia on the long ago first Pentecost Sunday. We must remember that the Pentecostal fervor poured out that day continues to be ours to seize, for the world is still full of people who need to hear the story we have to tell and need to feel the long ago strength and hope brought by the mighty rush of God's Spirit.

One need not be a pessimist to see the world – this Pentecost 2008 – as a place of discord and distrust, threatened by continuous disruptions, even disintegration. Ethnic cleansings, civil war, rampant inflation, food riots, foreclosures, super bugs, and rapidly escalating fuel costs all are a part of the daily news. The United States has squandered its role as moral compass, and no super power is emerging with the means and influence to take our place as a strong advocate for human rights and for the mutual upbuilding of humankind. Far more of our national budget is spent on military muscle than on caring for the vulnerable in our country and around the world. We are far from conquering the divides in our nation – divides of racism, gender equality, sexual identity, economic status and opportunity – and we silence voices that cry out rather than marveling at the beauty of the diversity which makes up the body of Christ. Rather than capitalizing on the riches among us, we close out the gifts of those unlike us. Rather than celebrating that there is a place for everyone at the Lord's table, we falsely inflate ourselves and consign others to eat in the kitchen. We miss the point of the Feast of Pentecost, just as did those who 2,000 years ago attributed the miracle of vernacular proclamation to new wine.

As the prophet Joel wrote 500 years before the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." The prophet proclaims that all people will share in the same knowledge of God that the prophets had. Sons and daughters, young and old, men and women, slaves and free: all people will testify and will live in harmony with God and one another, in relationships simultaneously leveled and exalted (Oxford Annotated Bible:1299, Hebrew Bible), because all will share baptism in and by the one Holy Spirit.

Friends, on this day of Pentecost, we all are filled with the one Spirit. Given such strength and united by such a force, what will we do? The city of Louisville and the wider world need the transformation which only God can effect, and God has distributed the needed gifts for that transformation among us. Will

we extinguish the flames, silence the tongues, and scoff at the message of hope, or do we dare acknowledge the oneness and power that is given us by our baptisms in the same Spirit and allow them to empower us to change the world?

Pentecost 2008: the great and glorious day of the Lord glows in and among us. Let us welcome the rush of the mighty wind which blends our gifts and makes us one.

To God be all glory, honor, and praise, world without end. Amen.