

*“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place... Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia... saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’” (Acts 2:1-12)*

Pentecost — from the Greek pentekostos, meaning "fiftieth," was a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest, and the revelation of the law at Mount Sinai. In the New Testament Pentecost story Luke tells, the Holy Spirit descended on 120 believers in Jerusalem on the fiftieth day after Jesus's resurrection. The Spirit empowered them to testify to God's saving work, emboldened the apostle Peter to preach to a bewildered crowd of Jewish skeptics, and drew three thousand converts from around the known world in one day. For many Christians, Pentecost marks the birthday of the Church. For many dedicated Methodists, Pentecost may bring to mind the birthday of the United Methodist Church and the sermon Rev. Albert C. Outler prepared in support of the union.

In 1968, the United Brethren and Methodist Church were joined together into the United Methodist Church. Dr. Albert C. Outler, theologian at Perkins Theological School best known for synthesizing John Wesley's approach to theology into the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral, stressing reliance on Scripture, tradition, reason and experience,” was the preacher at the service of union April 23, 1968. The litany in today's bulletin for an “unfinished church,” is based on Outler's reflection at that moment in the church's history, comparing it to the first church created by the Pentecost day.

I was not born yet, but some of you may remember that moment in time in the church's history, in which Outler gave his inspiring sermon. When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy were assassinated on April 4 and June 5. When the Vietnam War, and the protests against it, both waged on. When the bold social movement of the sexual revolution

first began rejecting gender norms. When violence and rioting broke out at the Chicago Democratic National Convention due to much of the civil unrest that seemed to plague the nation overnight, but was in fact, much more like a billowing storm from all the previous grievances that transpired that year. When the law and order platform, or the War on Crime promise of the Richard Nixon election, came to the forefront of politics, due to much of the civil unrest. As Rev. Alfred T. Day III, General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History of the UMC, has said of those days, “times were turbulent, divided, fearful, discontented and demoralizing as any time since.” However, with the world seemingly in shambles now due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic (~~I'd like to point out that spellcheck no longer flags coronavirus as a misspelled word, the word coronavirus is now official~~), and with the unfortunate incidences in Minnesota, Kentucky, and Georgia, where protests and resentment over racial divisions that has afflicted the nation for a millennia seemed to have re-opened an old and deep wound, some of us may feel that we're pretty close to those emotions had in 1968.

We are yet again at the precipice of separation and division. Yet again at the height of our disdain for our neighbors. Yet again at risk of falling into the abyss of fear and depression. And yet still, again, on Pentecost, the Church's birthday, we hear the annual liturgical text from Acts 2. Is this coincidence? Is it by accident Outler recites the same text on that momentous day, calling the new Church to a bold choice of unity in the face of the surrounding chaos, and offers markers for living-into a truly United Methodist Church? Is it simply by happenstance, that his words echo through time and speak just as loudly for us today as it did then? When he asked the faithful to consider that if the Church cannot be a hope-filled difference-maker in and for the world---let alone itself---then who will?

Outler proclaims, “Pentecost was the day when the real work of the [first] church began, when the Christ people accepted the agenda of their unfinished business in the world and began to get on with it! The day when Joel’s prophecy was fulfilled – when the Holy Spirit would come and abide as God’s governing presence in the midst of his people... it is rightly remembered as the day when the Christian church was launched on its career in history, for the world.”

Likewise, he continues to edify us through time saying, “This is the day when the real work of the United Methodist Church begins. It is a day when doors are opened that heretofore were closed, when new possibilities of reformation and renewal are literally ‘at hand’. Where once there were five different churches, now there is one. Differences that once kept us apart--- language, race, folkways, piety, personality and differing practices of democracy have been overcome. Separated Christian brothers and sisters rooted in a shared spirit of personal and social holiness are joined as family. What was once separate will make for a better, stronger, more complete, well-equipped church. However, this will only come to pass if the new church raises-up "frontiersman for tomorrow, dynamically adaptive to the new world as our forefathers were in theirs." This I believe, is what Pentecost is all about, and it’s what happened that day in April 1968, the power to say something about God’s unifying work in the world through the Holy Spirit, and for the rest of the world to take notice to the strange joinings of oxymorons, and to understand the Spirit’s power behind it.

We have heard it year after year on the church’s birthday, that the Holy Spirit descended onto the crowd like a violent wind and they were filled with the promised gift of “dunamis,” the greek word for “power” from on high, the ability to speak and understand each other’s native language. Undoing what was done by the once “united people” of Genesis 11, who built the tower of Babel. That is usually somewhat the gist of the word proclaimed on Pentecost Sunday.

However, in reading an old sermon by Rev. Will Willimon, I discovered something new about this first Pentecost “roll-call of the nations”. Tom Long, Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory, has pointed out to Rev. Willimon “that this Pentecost crowd was not only a diverse ethnic gathering of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, but a historically impossible gathering as well! These Medes who were there that Pentecost would have had a tough time getting to Jerusalem from Mesopotamia, not only because they had to travel a few hundred miles but because they would have had to travel a few hundred years as well. The Medes had been extinct as a nation for at least two centuries! And those Elamites were lost in the past. Last mentioned back in Ezra 2:7.”

Rev. Willimon also notes that Professor Long suggests Acts 2 is like saying, “You should have been there! We had a huge number of visitors for the service. Some were all the way from Montana! Some were from Arizona, Michigan, not to mention a whole van load of Assyrians, a couple of Babylonians and even a nice little Hittite couple who asked to be baptized.” This strange, playful story is Luke’s way of saying that, “when God’s Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, it was poured not just on a few, but on us all. The Spirit was given not just to the people who happened to speak Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek and happened to be living in Jerusalem in the first century. The Spirit was given to people of every century and every place.” In other words, the Spirit was given to the Chinese, the Spanish, the Russian, the German, the French, the Hindi, the Afroasiatic, the Bantu, and to all the long-gone languages of Latin, Coptic, Akkadian, and Sanskrit. “We were all there!”

Rev. Tom Long calls this the gift of Pentecost. The gift received on the first Pentecost two thousand years ago is the same gift we most desperately need and the world needs today to carry us into tomorrow together. He calls it, “the gift of something to say, a Word to speak in the

brokenness and tragedy of the world that is unlike any other word.” He asks, “Did you notice what happened to the church when the Spirit was given? It stood up and it spoke. It moved from silence to language.” It moved the disciples who huddled together in fear, to being disciples propelled to put God’s love into action. What once were a few people called to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit, were now nations of people compelled by the Holy Spirit to say something, and to understand it. “It talked and the whole world heard the good news in its own languages. As the prophet Joel said, "In the latter days, I will pour out my Spirit on all of humanity. And your sons and your daughters will prophesy." Your sons and your daughters will have a Word to speak, that life is stronger than death, that hope is deeper than despair, that every tear will be dried, and that in the power of Christ's resurrection, death and pain will be no more. That Word is our gift to speak through the brokenness and tragedy of the world, a word of good news and hope that is unlike any other word.”

It seems we are in a time of new birth, of rebirth and regrowth. Even our South Carolina conference’s resource for guidance in safely returning to in-person worship is fittingly entitled “Reset, Restart, Renew.” Perhaps our current time in history *is* just as “turbulent, divided, fearful, discontented and demoralizing” as it was in 1968 and in the first one hundred years of the Church, but the *missio dei*, (Mission of God) and the *missio spiritus* (Mission of the Holy Spirit) are still today one in the same for all who proclaim the good news to willful listeners. From the first to proclaim the good news in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, to his Apostle Peter, to Rev. Albert C. Outler, to Rev. Will Willimon, Rev. Fred Day, Rev. Tom Long, to *you* – though not through Catholic “apostolic succession”, but through discipleship we are “an unfinished church with unfinished business.” Therefore, as Tanya Linn Bennet writes for our litany this morning:

*“We gather [at home] in this time and place, all of us from different times and places, here to worship God. Like those disciples so many years ago, we are not sure we know the way. We are afraid to make mistakes. We are afraid to fail. But, Christ calls us to carry on the blessing of discipleship, to move forward in love and faithfulness, so that all might find a place in our holy place, our church. So long as even one of us is left outside the door because of our cold heartedness, [or left outside the door of our hearts, because of its hardness] we are an unfinished church. So long as any one is lonely, hungry, sick, in prison, naked, [or oppressed] we are an unfinished church. So long as any one of us is destitute of the great Hope that is our future in Christ Jesus, raised up to set us free from death into holy and everlasting life we are an unfinished church. Although we may be an unfinished church, we are God’s church, full of grace and love and hope. Every day is a new Pentecost, full of the promise and possibility that God offers. Today is a day of dreaming. A Pentecost day filled with refining fire, and holy smoke, and winds of change, and voices full of passion for God and for each other. Today is a new Pentecost Day, may we be birthed again into new beginning.”*

Amen.