

One Spirit, One Church

Do you enjoy reading Charles Schultz's classic comic strip, "Peanuts," as much as I do? One day, Linus is watching TV when his older sister Lucy assumes control, demanding that Linus change the channel to the program she wants to watch. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

You and I don't give much thought to our fingers, do we? Not, at least, unless we injure or lose the use of one or more of them. There's not much we can do with just one finger: maybe ring a doorbell or push the button on an elevator. One finger alone doesn't have much strength.

But consider all that you do with your hands each day. It would take some time to make such a list, because so much that we do with our hands is automatic. You may not even be conscious of the signal that comes from the brain through the nerves to the hand to perform a task that has become second nature to you. Think of all that you can accomplish when several fingers—especially when all five fingers—work together in unity. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts! As

a unit, the fingers have strength far greater than five times the strength of each individual finger.

And that's how it is with followers of Jesus. We see the pattern in the gospel stories of the first disciples. Unlike the fingers of Lucy van Pelt, they aren't that good at working together. They jockey for position, arguing about who will be greatest in the kingdom. When their Lord is arrested, they scatter; fragmented, frightened individuals.

But after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, his followers, in accordance with his command, have remained in Jerusalem and have gathered in an upper room to pray. With the Twelve, Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers, and other women and men, the group numbers a hundred and twenty persons. According to the passage from Luke's Acts of the Apostles that the church reads on this Pentecost Sunday, they are all together in one place, when they hear a sound like rushing wind—the first sign of the Spirit that blows where it chooses.

In the original biblical languages, the word for *spirit* also means *wind* and *breath*. The psalmist sings of the wind as God's messenger. In the beginning, God's wind, God's Spirit sweeps over the waters. Creation takes place with the sending of God's Spirit. And it is this very Spirit of Holiness that descends on the Pentecost gathering in Luke's account. Just as the Spirit breathes life into all God's creatures, so too, the Spirit breathes life into the church. On this day of Pentecost, the promised Holy Spirit comes upon believers not as individuals, but as the community of faith.

Over each head appears something like tongues of flame. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, fire signifies divine presence: revealed on Sinai's height, in the pillar that leads Israel through the wilderness, in the psalmist's song of God's "ministers of fire and flame." In Luke's first volume, the Gospel, Jesus speaks of bringing fire to the earth; his words are fulfilled in the fiery manifestation of God's Spirit on this day of Pentecost. The Spirit inflames the church, bringing it into being, enlivening it. In inspiring God's Word when it's heard, when it's proclaimed, and when it's acted upon, the Spirit sparks the church to acts of mercy and justice, offering Christ's love and new life in a death-dealing world.

Then and still today, the Holy Spirit enkindles the church into ministry and mission. This Sunday, the red paraments in the sanctuary reflect the color of Spirit fire. We see the fire of the Spirit in the logo of our own United Methodist Church: the Cross and Flame, which may be visible emblazoned on the lower portion of the banner behind me. Standing in the tradition of John Wesley, United Methodists use God-given reason as a tool in the understanding of scripture, so it's good to know that, literally, the word *Pentecost* means "fiftieth day."

For Christians, Pentecost is the last of the great fifty days of the Easter season. In biblical times, Pentecost is the Jewish festival of weeks, one of three feast days when all Israel, celebrating God's bounty and goodness, congregates in Jerusalem. The Pentecost gathering comprises Jews from all over the known world. Did you hear that list of

nations? What Luke tells us is extraordinary! These Galileans—who by the way are not exactly noted for their linguistic ability—these followers of Jesus are enabled by the Spirit to speak in foreign languages they have never studied, to speak in the languages of people from all over the world. Each person hears of God's saving acts through Jesus in his or her own native tongue. What a blessing! What a miracle!

This wondrous Spirit-gift of languages should not be confused with the practice of speaking in tongues, with the *glossolalia* that we hear of elsewhere in the New Testament. This Pentecost speech is not unintelligible, nor does it require interpretation, but is in actual languages that people understand. The Spirit enables Israel and the newborn church to understand one another. Today God's Spirit continues to guide us, the church, in understanding one another, giving us the ability to communicate with Christians around the globe. The Spirit makes us one!

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost fulfills God's word spoken through the prophet Joel: that this same Spirit will be poured out on *all* flesh—sons and daughters, old and young. This prophecy still rings true today, for when we gather in Christ's name, the Spirit descends upon us, just as on that first-century day of Pentecost; descends on *all* of us, making us one Spirit-led community.

Surely the Spirit has descended upon Peter, has empowered Peter to stand, boldly and clearly proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and his resurrection from the dead. Remember, this is the same Peter who has

lacked faith; the same Peter who has confronted Jesus at the prediction of his passion and death; the same Peter who has three times denied his Lord. When this Spirit gets hold of you, you, like Peter, are no longer the same. You're no longer hiding in fear, but standing up, witnessing to the truth. You're changed, you're shaped, you're equipped to be used by God in a mighty way. With the outpouring of the Spirit, this Peter, weak, impulsive, fearful, all-too-human Peter, is transformed into the rock on which Christ builds his church. And Christ's desire, expressed in his farewell prayer, is that his church, his followers be *one*; that, like the fingers of a hand, we work together in unity.

We disciples of Jesus are as different as we can be. Yet, as Evan read from First Corinthians, we are all baptized in one Spirit. Jew or Greek, slave or free, Paul affirms. Rich and poor. Young and old. Black and white. Laity and clergy. Male and female. We celebrate our diversity! We are all baptized into one body: the one body of Christ that we call the church. Today Evan confirms, *makes* firm, the vows others took for him at his baptism. Today he will profess his faith and be received into this one body of Christ.

On this day of Pentecost, we celebrate the birthday of the church. At a birthday celebration, it's appropriate to talk about gifts. In his first letter to Christians at Corinth, the Apostle Paul lists the amazing variety of gifts that the Spirits allots to each one of you, just as the Spirit chooses.

Take a moment now. Turn your heads. Really. I invite you to look around this sanctuary at your sisters and brothers. Think about the gifts of each one, gifts that this church needs to faithfully live into its calling. Some of you read or proclaim God's Word. Some of you do the work of written communication. Some of you play musical instruments and sing anthems to the glory of God. Some of you share the love of Jesus with young people. Some of you distribute Holy Communion to those who can't receive it here. Some of you visit in hospitals and homes. Some of you are faithful stewards of the church's finances. Some of you work to ensure that this building and these grounds are a beautiful place in which to worship and fellowship. Some of you practice hospitality. You share your unique, God-given gifts gratefully and willingly. On this day of Pentecost, we celebrate the many gifts of the Spirit, for each one is needed in order for the church to be the body of Christ.

On this festival day, we rejoice! We, the church, are one in the Spirit. The Spirit works within us in the life of discipleship: guiding, counseling, reminding of all that Christ has said. The Holy Spirit comes dancing into our common life, leading the church, leading us to call on the name of the Lord, leading us on the way of salvation. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.