

“God of our Descendants”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Pentecost Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

“Now concerning spiritual gifts... I do not want you to be uninformed,” Paul writes to the Corinthian church. Once in Bible study on this passage at my previous congregation, one of our readers mispronounced that last word. She said, “concerning spiritual gifts... I do not want you to be uniformed”! This brilliantly expresses Paul’s point here: bring together diverse talents and spiritual gifts together, but don’t try to flatten them out or make everyone the same. “I do not *want* you to be uniformed.” What Paul *does* want—and what the church in every place seeks—is to affirm our different gifts, our unity in the Holy Spirit, and our determined commitment to the common good.

The Roman city of Corinth in Paul’s day was a center of trade, full of different languages, cultures and practices from across the Mediterranean. The first Christian church in Corinth is the same way. Its people spoke a variety of languages, and their diverse gifts and talents manifested in sometimes competing ways. The Corinthians quarrel among themselves, contesting which spiritual gifts are better: speaking in tongues, wisdom, prophecy, secret knowledge, healing, working miracles, and the list goes on. One way that Paul could stop the fighting between them would be to say that everyone should be the same. But instead, Paul recognizes the differences among their abilities, and names each as a gift from the Holy Spirit.

This is part of the mystery of Pentecost, which we celebrate every year as “the birthday of the church”. Remember that as the Holy Spirit came upon the believers in Jerusalem, She took the symbolic form of tongues of fire, and we’re told that “a tongue rested on each of them”. Ever since, the church has celebrated the diverse gifts of its people, signs of the ever-creative, abundant Holy Spirit. We embody and gather those gifts here today as the church—spiritual gifts that are various abilities to care for the community. None of us can do everything, but each of us can do *something*. We can give witness to the

flame of the Holy Spirit that is above our heads. We are *not* uniformed, but we are united—by the one Spirit.

That same Spirit, manifest in different abilities, has been on vivid display throughout our communities in these days. We have seen and experienced an abundance of diverse spiritual gifts in this past week: grievous lament for the unjust killing of George Floyd, impassioned speech and actions of peaceful protest, organizing food/water/shelter by volunteers, keeping vigil against those who would cause harm, teaching children how to make sense of this time, connecting neighbors on text threads, communicating in ways that are clear and calming, medical volunteers offering first aid, and people showing up by the hundreds each day with brooms and gloves to clean up our cities. I'm inspired by the broad commitment to a better future that's on display, and encouraged by the way that Spirit is active far beyond the church as well. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit," Paul says, "for the common good".

This public commonwealth, or the "common good" that Paul writes of, is a consistent care of the church throughout the centuries. We celebrate God's faithfulness throughout each generation—from Abram and Sarai, to Miriam and Moses, to the kings and prophets of the Bible, to Jesus and the disciples, to the women and men of the early church, on down the unbroken line to spiritual saints whose efforts for justice, love and mercy we evoke to this very day. The Spirit of God, starting from the very beginning of creation, has, called on each one to serve the common good.

I have been thinking in recent days, also, of the generations who will come after us. How many untold centuries of people will follow us, will look back on our examples? Surely they are part of the common good also, a spiritual commonwealth that extends through time as well as in the current moment. So often in the prayers of the church we invoke the "God of our ancestors". What would it look like if we prayed instead to the "God of our descendants"? How would keeping our descendants top of mind change the forms of our faithfulness? Would we find greater courage to be the church for future generations? What decisions would we make now instead of later, or make differently, if we held our descendants firmly in mind? What would we do now, rather than delay for tomorrow? If we are overly focused on preserving the legacies of the past, we might miss the Holy Spirit's winds of change in our own day, pushing us to heal the planet, alleviate poverty, resist racism, seek justice and make peace. Spirit calls us to put our spiritual gifts to work for the common good—including not only ourselves, but also those countless generations who follow after us.

When we hold our descendants in mind as part of the common good, the Holy Spirit makes remarkable healing possible. Leah Penniman is a co-founder of [Soul Fire Farm](#) in New York, which focuses on regenerative farming that reconnects Black, indigenous folks, and other people of color with the land. I heard her [on a recent podcast](#) tell the remarkable story of how her ancestors braided the seeds of native plants into the hair of African people before they were taken from captivity and forced onto transatlantic slave ships. They didn't know what would happen to those kidnapped and taken to America, but they knew they would need familiar food and medicine. Penniman says, "Our ancestral great-great-great-great-great grandmothers gathered up their seeds, braided them into their hair as insurance for the future, because they believed we would exist."

However many generations later, Leah Penniman started doing urban farming in the city dirt of Worcester, Massachusetts, poisoned by lead and other toxins. She discovered that one of the plants that came from Africa, a flower called pelargonium, "has a superpower which is that it accumulates lead and other heavy metals into its leaves to cleanse the soil." She says, "we ended up using the pelargonium all over the city to do 'phytoremediation' and started to pull the lead out of soils and rehabilitate." The ancestors would not have known of this plant's power against poisoned dirt, but they gave what gifts they could, trusting that descendants might need them.

Church, what seeds are we putting out into the world? How are each of us acting in ways that will cause our descendants to bless us and not curse us? Pentecost renews the church with God's Holy Spirit

again—not for the sake of venerating all we have received from our ancestors, but for the sake of serving the common good of our descendants. God calls you and I, the church and our neighbors, every person in the Cities, in this country and beyond, to be well-used by the Holy Spirit for healing our shared common life, putting our diverse gifts into productive use in this moment, as seeds for a future we cannot envision or manifest on our own.

Leah Penniman says this of her ancestors in Africa: “[I]f they could face this kidnapping, this uncertainty about their future...and decide to save some seed for us, believing that they would have descendants, believing that we would need to inherit this seed, who...am I to give up on my descendants no matter how hard things feel? And I’ve been fortified—my ancestral grandmothers have been in my dreams, braiding seeds—and that has really fortified me when I get overwhelmed and touch despair and worry... Just keep passing those seeds down; that’s our duty.” In the holy work of being the church rooted in wild times by the Holy Spirit, even though we face disruption and turmoil we are held together in hope. We do not lose heart. To each is *still* given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. So let us keep passing down our seeds, to be used in ways yet unseen by the ever-creative, ever-renewing, ever-delivering God we are honored to serve. Come, Holy Spirit! Amen.