

What are **we** doing here? To most of the world around us, what we do makes no sense. Oh, some, who count themselves “spiritual” may say they “commune” individually with the divine in this way or that, but the idea of coming together with all kinds of people, some of whom you find it hard even to like, in order to worship a God who calls and challenges you and demands your obedience, that’s totally foreign, to more and more of the world.

So, how did **we** get here? How did **we** get here with all of our diversity, all of our challenging personalities, varied views on scripture, conflicting faith perspectives, and differing opinions? How did **we** get here, together, this morning? How did **we** all get here, together, around this common table? How did **we**, a motley crew, called “God’s people,” all get here today, here in this congregation, or for that matter, any other congregation of Christians?

Well, here’s what the Bible says:

We began as a family, descended from common ancestors. But then because of a desire to live for ourselves, we scattered, and were separated by race, language, culture, and ways of living.

God tried, in many ways, to bring us back together. Through Abraham, Sarah and their descendents, God created a people who were to be a means by which all people might be blessed, blessed by knowing God’s goodness and love. When their descendants found themselves enslaved in Egypt, God called Moses to lead them out, gave them the law to guide, provided for them in the wilderness, and led them to a good, fertile land. God continued to be with them, sending prophets to remind them of the special purpose they’d been given and calling them back when they wandered from it. Finally, in Jesus, God came to us in the flesh, to show us the way to life, life for all people.

The blessing God offered all people, a blessing meant to bring us all to oneness, confronted our sin, our stubborn desire to remain separate so that we could individually try to lift ourselves up. That resistance to God’s gift, led to Jesus’ death, and the scattering of his disciples. Yet God wove that tragedy into God’s purpose, remaking it into God’s great triumph. In Jesus’ resurrection, God came back, to re-gather those scattered disciples, and to begin again to bring us all back together.

Now, at Pentecost, God again returns to us in the person of the Holy Spirit, determined to embrace all of us. There, on Pentecost those scattered disciples were all in one place. Yet, even after years together, they weren’t really *together*, not the way they way they would soon become.

Then, without warning, the Holy Spirit descended. And they began to tell the good news of Jesus’ resurrection in many different languages and, amazingly, the strangers in town, from all over the world, could hear, understand, and believe.

And then, in the days that followed those who’d been together, yet weren’t really *together*, and those who had been total strangers, truly came *together*. They began to love one another, living and sharing, for one another. They became a sign of what God wanted for the whole world – a family!

So, we didn’t get here because we share the same opinions, economic level, or backgrounds. We’re here because of a miraculous work of God’s Spirit. And we, gathered here as we are, are but one of the many miracles of the Spirit, one of the signs of God’s bringing together what sin has separated.

Maybe you saw people on your way in today that you don’t like. Maybe you don’t like me. But

Jesus' death says that's beside the point. He didn't necessarily like everyone he died for – but loved them! And his resurrection says that's beside the point, too; he surely didn't like everyone he rose for and came back to – but he loved them! And, now, today, Pentecost says that's beside the point, too; Jesus didn't necessarily like everyone he poured his Spirit upon – but he loved them! He loved them, and wanted them to be able to love one another, and the world, the way he did. So, we don't necessarily have to like each other, but like Jesus, we can love each other! That's why his Spirit has put us here in church – *together – to love each other!* That's where our witness for him begins!

That's one of the hardest about following Jesus - being with other people who are following Jesus!

Jesus told a parable about that. He portrayed God's kingdom like a big party. First, the insiders are invited. But they're all too busy. So, in desperation, the host invites anybody and everybody – the lame, the blind, the broken-hearted, the failures, those who are never invited to anything.

So, how do you like the Kingdom of God?

It's time to decide because, it was that parable of the kingdom that was being enacted at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descends and makes a family out of anybody and everybody – the *church*.

You know, it sounds so “un-modern” I'm almost afraid to bring it up, but Christians once taught that “apart from the church there is no salvation.” Now, before you dismiss this as the height of arrogance – “Sorry, we're in and you're out!” let's think about it in terms of the salvation that begins to unfold at Pentecost – it's a group, a corporate, a social reality, something shared with others, something lived out – together!

We come to church to “practice salvation,” to learn the ways that fit with salvation in Jesus. The church is more than a path to salvation someday in eternity; it is salvation embodied, practiced, and enjoyed here, now. Open hospitality, confessing sin and receiving forgiveness, bearing and forgiving one another, living with gratitude and generosity, gifts to the poor, sharing the “good news” with those who haven't heard it, are what this “salvation” requires of us – and here's where we live it!

Yes, it sounds “un-modern” to say that the church is “necessary for salvation.” But to say that means more than that the Church is the “ark” that rescues the righteous few leaving the wicked rabble to perish in the flood. It means that the church is Christ's means of enabling his loving purpose which is communion – communion with us and with each other - to be fulfilled. The Church is where God propels egotists like us toward our neighbor. It's where we're taught to count strangers, yes, even those we might wish were still strangers, as family. It's where we learn the gratitude that humbles us enough to step outside of ourselves, and learn to love, care, and give, for people we'd otherwise find it difficult even to like. It's where we learn the disciplines of discipleship, of worship, of seeking to learn and grow in faith, and of forgiving, even our enemies, as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Genesis says life began when the Spirit hovered over the chaotic waters and brought forth creation. The creative, life-giving Spirit loves to make something out of nothing. Pentecost is like creation all over again. God's gathering up many diverse people and making them into a new family, the church.

People were gathered at a retreat. They were sharing what they enjoyed about their church. Some liked the fellowship, others liked the friends, still others, the music. But then, one woman said, “Part

of me hates this church.” Before I came here, my life was my life. I was fairly content with myself, doing whatever I wanted with myself, my time, my money. Everything was “mine.” Then my church took me to Haiti and made me see people dying because of their poverty yet who were clearly richer in faith than I’ll ever be. I could’ve been fairly happy without the church. Now, nothing’s “mine” anymore; those strangers in Haiti have become my passion, because they’ve become *my* family.”

Two years ago, on a Mission trip to Ponca Creek, the youth interviewed the children out there, to get a little biographical information, and took individual pictures of each of them. Caitlin Zeller agreed to put all this together in a display for our sharing when we got back. Well I typed up the statements and e-mailed them to her (or thought I had). The Saturday before she was to bring it to worship, I went to her graduation party and learned that she’d not gotten my e-mail. I told her not to worry, we could do without. But she said, no, send it again. And the next morning she brought this beautiful display. She’d stayed up till 3:00 am to complete it, because the Spirit had made it so that her time and talents weren’t hers anymore. Those kids out there were her family. She wanted them, in spite of whatever resistance is in some of our hearts, to be our family, too. She’d come to know that’s what God wants us to be.

God’s Holy Spirit continues to make something out of nothing, continues to gather what is scattered, connect what’s separated, make a family out of strangers, and empower ordinary people to be saints.

I know that resistance to being “family” is great; we find many reasons to keep ourselves separate, to look at our lives and the blessings God’s given us as “mine,” to be used as “I” want, for “myself.” We can do that a long time; even all our life. We can even give our resistance “spiritual” excuses.

Just remember, though, that’s just what they are, excuses. Because the real Spirit, the **Holy** Spirit, is constantly at work to overcome all the things in our hearts and minds, histories and egos, that would keep us separate. The **Holy** Spirit is constantly at work to bring us together.

That Spirit, the **Holy** One, is at work right here, right now. Pentecost continues. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Loving God, we give you thanks, on this Day of Pentecost,  
...that you did not leave us alone but came to us, in the power of your Holy Spirit,  
...and breathed your life-giving power into every life gathered here this day.  
You found a way to get to each person here, even when we had no idea of how to get to you.  
Furthermore, you refused to let us be alone, all locked up in ourselves.  
You found a way to thrust us into the church,  
...to drag us into the fellowship with a group of people whom we would probably never have joined  
...if you had left us to our own devices.  
By your Spirit you put us into a new, diverse family that stretches to the ends of the earth.  
In all this we give thanks that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, you saved us from ourselves.

We give you thanks and praise for the conscience you have granted each one of us,  
...that pushes and prods and hints and annoys us  
...until we acknowledge you are the sovereign who seeks joy for all.

We give you thanks and praise, too, for the signs you have set all about us,  
...photographs of the starving, stories about the struggling, reminders about the needy,  
...and most of all your guidance in the Spirit when we read the words of Jesus that unsettle us,  
...challenge us, remind us that whatever is done for the least is done for Jesus,

We also thank and praise you for the memory of those times when we ourselves struggled,  
...and yet all along your Spirit was spurring others to work for our aid, to reach out and save,  
...recalling your goodness in all times seasons,  
...and acknowledging that to those whom much is given, much is expected,

Saving God, Living Spirit, we thank you that you are active, not content to watch from a distance,  
...but insisting there is a great work to be done and that we are partners!

For those who have allowed their consciences to grow dull, who ignore the prodding,  
...the pleading, who plod along in darkness, afraid of the Light of Truth,  
...for these, and for ourselves, we pray.

Calling to mind as well those who have worked, inspired, and renewed, living the gospel, who have,  
...through neglect, exhaustion, disillusionment, or despair turned away or lost their way,  
...for these, and for ourselves, we pray.

For the ones who have never heard, who have successfully held you at bay,  
...who've set up barriers against your Spirit, who've defended their illusion against your every effort,  
...that with time, love, and compassion we may illumine each other, that all may know your glory,  
...and that in your time at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,  
...for these, and for ourselves, we pray.