

**Day of Pentecost + June 4, 2017**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI**  
**Acts 2:1-21**

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

I am proud of our Confirmation class. The six of us met weekly from January through last Sunday. The book we used is called “Manna and Mercy.” It creatively tells the story of God as revealed in the Bible, and centers the storytelling in the abundance of God’s love and grace—that, just like the mysterious manna that fell from the sky each night and gave the wandering Israelites all the food they needed, God provides for us and there is enough for all.

Problems arose in Exodus when selfish people tried to hoard the manna, because they didn’t trust that God was giving them all the food they needed. The effect of their hoarding would have been that others would not have enough. These people became what the author of our Confirmation book called “big deals,” those who thought only about themselves, at the expense of others. But God had cleverly arranged that any manna not consumed by the end of each day would by the next morning, so it *couldn’t* be hoarded. What we read in our book, and what is still happening today, is that down through history there has nonetheless been a succession of “big deals,” leaders whose selfishness afflicted the very people they are supposed to be helping and protecting. The truth is, *their* hoarded manna rots too—it just takes longer.

The Day of Pentecost is generally thought of as the birthday of Christ’s church on earth. But this day is also about manna and mercy. Pentecost originated in Jewish tradition as the Festival of Weeks, marking the time of the early grain harvest on the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover. All able-bodied men were required to travel to Jerusalem for this festival and bring two loaves of leavened bread as a sign of God’s abundance, that there is enough for all.

But as our Confirmation class learned, people acting as “big deals” continually ignored this. In so doing they fractured God’s desire for a universe of *shalom*—of deep peace, of harmony, of wholeness. The story of God, as we read in Confirmation, is really about the mending of these fractures as God continues to dream of *shalom*. This is why God sent Jesus, “God with us,” into our world. This is why Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised on the third day as the “first fruits” of the reconciliation of all things in God’s love. And this is why God gave God’s people gift of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost, just as Jesus had promised.

There *is* enough for all. We sang about this in our psalm today—about how all living creatures look to God “to give them their food in due season.” Then why do so many people on earth suffer from constant hunger?

Right now the world produces more than 1½ times enough food to feed everyone on the planet. The world’s population is 7.3 billion, but enough food is produced each year to feed 10 billion. But leaders who are acting like “big deals” are hoarding food and wealth. Consequently, 11% of the earth’s population—795 million, more than number of people in the United States—are starving or on the brink of starvation. The oil-rich country of Venezuela is a recent casualty of this human tragedy. Not long ago Venezuela enjoyed a thriving economy and magnificent support for music and the arts across all ages. But because of a succession of selfish leaders, 82% of Venezuelans now live in poverty, and the country is headed toward total political and economic collapse.

Hunger, therefore, is not a matter of scarcity—but rather one of injustice. We are called to speak out. As we sang in our opening hymn, “Where deceit conceals injustice, kindle us to speak your truth.”

Injustice also account for the barriers that “big deals” throw up between themselves and people who are different in whatever way—background, skin color, economic status, religious beliefs.

They use these as reasons to oppress and exclude, ignorant of the reality that God has provided enough for all. They can't see that by taking more than their share, they are making it that much harder for God to heal the universe. Again, we sang: "Crumble walls that still divide us; make us one in Christ our Lord."

Here in Acts 2 we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples, and then to all who believe. The earliest period of the Christ's church was actually its crowning era of inclusivity. At the end of Matthew Jesus tells the disciples to "go and make disciples of *all* nations." At the end of Luke, Jesus tells them that the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to *all* nations. And near the end of John, the gospel writer tells us that his book was written so that *all* may come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and, through believing, have life in his name.

But as early as the second century AD, people began dividing themselves into factions. Some became fanatic followers of this false prophet or of that heresy, and fighting over religious beliefs has continued ever since, although with the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation coming in a few months, Catholics and Lutherans, at least, have been engaging in dialogue about what we have in common instead of what we don't.

The trouble in our increasingly divided country, and world, is that we have allowed differences to become divisions. We erect walls between ourselves and others whose appearance, politics, or beliefs are different from ours. What happens as a result of these terrible walls? Hatred, violence, and war. Disregard for the sanctity of human life and the dignity of each human being. Anyone who has been a victim of bullying or any sort of abuse understands this very well.

On that first Day of Pentecost there were no divisions. When the Holy Spirit came into the disciples with those flames and that great rush of wind, they began to praise God. Everyone present from the great variety of nations understood them perfectly, each in their own language. All were

bound together in this miraculous event. Peter's great speech at the end of our first reading concludes with a sweeping gesture of inclusivity: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Here on Pentecost, God is inviting us to see difference not as a reason to reject and oppress others, but as a sign of God's creativity and grace. In our reading today from 1 Corinthians, Paul is essentially saying just this:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

How could we *not* embrace the richness of difference in our world? Twenty years ago, in the book *Cultivating Humanity*, University of Chicago Professor Martha Nussbaum urged teachers to help students cultivate a narrative imagination in order to connect with others whose lives they were not familiar with. She explains,

This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the motions and wishes and desire that someone so placed might have.

Stories build empathy. Empathy builds compassion. And compassion—that quality of "suffering with" into which the crucified Jesus invites us, and which sustains us through all our trials--compassion will bring the healing that our world so desperately needs. As we sang, "Sweep us into costly service, there with Christ to bear the cross."

Filled with the Holy Spirit this day and always, let us bring to *all* people the good news of God's manna and mercy.

Amen.