

FCCS June 4, 2017
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“Growing Pains”

It's that time of year to pull out all the camping gear; find out what needs patching, blowing up, dusting off, see whether or not the camp stove will make it for one more season. It's time to start looking for s'more sticks and kabob skewers, and what is a camping adventure without a few good ghost stories. Every family has a ghost story or two, the Christian family is no exception. This particular day of the year the church tells a Holy Ghost story- we call it Pentecost and it occurs every year on the seventh Sunday after Easter.

The story goes like this... a long time ago people came from all around to celebrate the festival of the harvest. The word Pentecost originates from the Greek pentekostos, or the Hebrew Shavuot which means “fiftieth day.”

This was the second biggest festival of the Jewish year and it happened fifty days from the end of Passover. Those who followed Jesus gathered with the enormous crowd, still hoping to reconcile their Jewish heritage with their experiences of Jesus' teaching.

Suddenly something happened that was beyond their wildest dreams; tongues of fire came out of nowhere and touched the tops of every head, and even though they spoke different languages, everyone in that room was able to understand one another.

In one fell swoop the impossible became reality and disparate people from every time and place were able to communicate with one another.

We call this Sunday the birthday of the church because this group of people, on this particular day started a movement to build communities of inclusivity. Those gathered shared an understanding; God's love and the gifts of the Spirit are for **ALL** people; regardless of gender, cast, class, race, slave or free. Imagine that, a universally understood truth grounded in love and inclusion.

That is the story of Pentecost, that is the story of the church coming into being. Wouldn't it be something if when people said "church" today any place in the world, in any context- what they meant was a universally understood truth grounded in love and inclusion.

Alas, the human condition being what it is, it wasn't long before egos got involved and the disciples namely Peter and Paul, began spreading the Gospel in different directions, each having different ideas about how it should be done, who should be included and who should not.

Do you see what I'm getting at here folks; the church began as one body, with one language, and a unification of purpose. That is really important for us to understand.

Fast forward a couple thousand years and we can't agree on who belongs where.

Alan Kelchner and I have been leading a conversation on white privilege for the past several weeks. Of the multiple articles we have read together, one was written by Rev. Traci Blackmon, the national UCC coordinator for Justice and Witness Ministries.

She writes about her struggle as a young African American girl raised to believe that God was male and that women didn't belong in ministry, furthermore she was raised to believe that Jesus was white.

Let me just point out that it is readily acknowledged by Christian scholars that Jesus was an afro-sematic Palestinian, yet in most church murals, stained glass windows, on bulletin covers and book covers Jesus is as white at me.

Why is that?

How is an image of a white Jesus in a world that is not predominantly white skinned in keeping with the goal of Pentecost, the goal of inclusion and unification?

Traci Blackmon leaves readers with a question, "If the possibility of your sacred symbols (i.e. the color of Jesus) changing is uncomfortable for you, or difficult to imagine, ask yourself why."

Division permeates every aspect of our lives my friends. Division determines how our grocery stores are structured, how loans are offered, where voting lines are drawn, and how neighborhoods are constructed.

Nearly every day, I ask myself the question why church, why now? Is it significant, is it worth investing our best time and energy or should we be doing something else? What I come back to over and over again is that church, real church, who we are and who we mean to be- stands to model something that the rest of our world desperately needs.

The church, born out of unity, called to radical inclusivity, has a unique and valuable perspective with which to engage the world.

Friends lest you ever doubt that what this church has to offer is relevant to a divided and hurting world remember this...

How we are with one another matters.

How we share with one another and how we honor the diversity among us matters.

We may be a small group of people, but the witness we make to this Valley is mighty. When people drive past our building, they see a Christian church and a Jewish synagogue sharing space in joy and peace. When visitors come into this space they see children and people of varying abilities happily sharing in a worship celebration. Those are significant witnesses to the hope of Pentecost.

Of course, there is plenty of work to do to create a fully inclusive, multi-cultural, multi-racial community of faith, but I hope that a visitor on any given Sunday experiences our willingness to grow, and expand in our understanding of what it means to be truly inclusive.

I'll be honest, Pentecost for the church today is more of a promise than a reality. A hope that what once was and may be again; a family of God with a unified vision of love and inclusivity.

Until that day we practice, and we pray for true openness and understanding. Amen