

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, May 15, 2016)

Texts:

Our text for this Pentecost Sunday was read and sung as noted below in our liturgist's remarks:

We are invited to be awakened today by the Spirit still burning brightly as She did all those years ago as the Church was born when believers gathered together in one place.

Today, we will be awakened by the story as interpreted in the Lectionary Story Bible by Ralph Milton and the song written by our former minister, the Reverend James Manley.

Let us begin by calling on the Spirit through that song, "Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness."

Chorus:

Spirit, spirit of gentleness.

Blow through the wilderness, calling and free.

Spirit, spirit of restlessness. Stir me from placidness.

Wind, wind on the sea.

It was seven weeks since Jesus died, but the disciples knew Jesus was still alive.

One day, the disciples were all together, with many other people. It was the day of Pentecost, an important time for Jewish people.

Then something very strange happened. Some said there was the sound of a strong wind. Others said there were little bits of fire dancing around among the disciples and alighting on their heads.

The strangest part was that the disciples began to talk in new ways. Nobody was sure what kind of languages they spoke. Even the disciples weren't sure about the new words they heard themselves saying.

But others understood.

"Hey!" someone said, "I come from a place where we speak a different language. How come I can understand what he's saying?"

People were there from many faraway places. They understood many different languages. Yet they could each understand what the disciples were saying.

"What is going on here?" people asked.

"You drank too much wine!" somebody shouted to Peter.

"No," said Peter. Then he stood up and talked to all the people who had come together for Pentecost.

"My friends," said Peter, "we're not drunk. Something very important has happened here." Then Peter told them the whole story, beginning many, many years ago with Abraham and Sarah, right up until the time of Jesus. Then Peter told them how Jesus was God's Messiah.

You sang in a stable, You cried from a hill,
Then You whispered in silence When the whole world was still,
And down in the city You called once again
When You blew through Your people On the rush of the wind.

(Chorus)

Peter explained that from now on, God's Spirit would be with everyone who believed in Jesus. We would not be able to see Jesus alive again the way the disciples had seen him. But Jesus would be alive in our hearts. Peter called it "the Holy Spirit."

Soon there were people in many places who knew about Jesus. These people got together to help each other, to eat together, to remember the things that Jesus said, and to talk about living in God's way. When people came together like this, they called it a church.

You call from tomorrow, You break ancient schemes,
From the bondage of sorrow The captives dream dreams;
Our women see visions, Our men clear their eyes.
With bold new decisions Your people arise.
(Chorus)

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "***Come Together Right Now...Over Me***"

Please pray with me...

Holy Spirit, we are not ready for you, but we know that you are ready for us—ready to change our lives if we will let you.

Help us prepare by setting our hearts on fire with love; by blowing away our fears and doubts; by tuning our ears to the rich diversity of language and culture around the world; by opening our eyes to the amazing beauty and power of your creation; by breathing into us the joy and hope of the resurrected Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Brothers and sisters we are GATHERED here today...

Sung: We GATHER together to ask the Lord's Blessing.

Sung: Gathered here in the mystery of this hour. Gathered here in one strong body. Gathered here in the struggle and the power. Spirit draw near.

In years past when I've looked at this Pentecost story, in fact, for pretty much my whole life, the central theme that stood out for me was the fire of the Spirit as it alighted on the heads of each person gathered there. Can you imagine that sight and what it must have felt like?

Over time, I was drawn in by the power of the Spirit manifested in the wind that blew through the believers and alerted them that something powerful was happening.

In more recent times, the incredible nature of the Spirit to make itself known in whatever language is spoken so that all could understand at once has moved me as we live in such a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment here in Los Angeles as do so many around the world.

And then this week, I had the tables turned on me, much like the Spirit is wont to do at any time, and I realized for the first time the power that was manifested by the GATHERING of those who came to that upper room. These brave souls, knowing what they were risking by coming together so soon after the one they had followed and believed in had been so brutally killed. Would their gathering together at this tense time be like so many fish gathering in a barrel, so that their being caught and killed would be made even easier for the Roman authorities?

And yet, they gathered. They came together, drawn by their belief and, I think, by the power of the Spirit that was about to come among them and assure them that this movement wasn't just for then and them, but for the multitudes of souls that would come after them as well.

This is why we consider Pentecost the birthday of the church. This gathering together, no matter who we are or where we come from or what language we speak, signals to the Spirit that we're ready,

we're willing, we're able to receive the power and the fire that God so much wants to bestow upon us. And, truly, isn't it only together that we can manage such a righteous and powerful charge?

In that place as in this one, "the Spirit of God has rushed in to empower many different kinds of people to do something astounding: communicate effectively with one another," our UCC theologian, Kathryn Matthews commented on our story for this week. "Bridges were built and crossed in a moment, and the differences among them, instead of dividing, provided startling illustration of just how great the power of God is. Underneath the differences of nationality and language, there was a fundamental unity that was not only touched but enlivened and experienced, profoundly, by many who were there. Others scoffed and interpreted even the most amazing of events through the eyes and ears of cynicism, but those with hearts and minds that were open to the movement of the Spirit knew that a new day had come."

A new day. Isn't that what Christ calls us to right now in this place? Each time we gather together here, we affirm the power of the Spirit not only in our individual lives but in the life of this church and in all of God's creation.

As you may have read in this week's About Our Folks missive and will hear today from the writer's own mouth during our Time to Give, our own Lester Wakefield has a powerful opinion about what it means to be a part of a church such as ours. The strength of the church as you'll hear him express isn't just about keeping these doors open or, although I'm very thankful for it, a salary for your pastor, it's about the deep devotion of each person here to care not only for yourself but for one another and for this body that gathers every Sunday and throughout the week in, yes, you guessed it, SPIRIT. For whether we gather together physically, which I do think is an important aspect of being a church, we also gather together in Spirit as we hold one another in prayer and check in with each other during the week.

I have seen with my own eyes and experienced with my own heart the power of people gathered here, no matter who they are or where they come from or even what they believe, for that matter, as joys and concerns are lifted in both large and small groups and the Spirit is felt in ways very much like the tongues of fire that alit on the heads of that first church so many years ago.

As I mentioned in my reflections last week, I think one of the greatest powers we produce in coming together is through our differences. This is one of the great truths this Pentecostal story provides us. Just as we heard in our children's story today and in The United Voices anthem, there are so many ways to say, "Hello" and "Thank You," but it is the same Spirit that carries through each language and binds us together as we see that what makes each of us unique only makes us stronger when we gather together.

"Differences can actually enrich and enliven what we share if we can reach across what separates us, not only in language and culture but also in religious upbringing, economic class, educational background, and basic personality types," Kate Matthews writes. "If we learn to communicate effectively, to hear what God is still speaking today, we will hear a call, together, that may astound us and gather us into something more effective and more amazing than we were before."

What do you have to bring to this gathering? What is it that brings you here today and each Sunday?

There is so much power in what you have to give. So much energy in what you have to provide. Do you realize how much your presence gives to this gathering? Do you know how important it is for your own life to be here as part of a group that loves and cares for you? Do you realize the power of being held in the Spirit throughout the week by this gathering of souls?

"The first work of Pentecost is all being gathered in one place." Greg Moore and Cameron Merrill write in their article, "Pentecost: Claiming All Ages as Holy." "...we would do well to note that

gathering is always the work of God the Spirit. Just as she hovered over the waters at creation and began to gather light and dark, dry land and sky, just as she gathered in the waters of Mary's womb and the Word began to take flesh, and just as she gathers the church each week into one place, anytime there is a gathering together in the Spirit of God, we are witnessing Pentecost."

Sung: Gather us in, the lost and forsaken, gather us in the blind and the lame. Call to us now, and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of our name!"

Amen.