

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**

(Delivered on Pentecost Sunday, May 20, 2018)

Text: **Acts 2:1-21** (from Seasons of the Spirit)

*(Please note: Our text for Pentecost was read by our two liturgists, Janel and Matt, and told in story form as found in our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum.)*

JANEL: Something unusual was in the air in Jerusalem that day. It wasn't the heat, the chirping birds, or the clip-clopping donkeys pulling squeaky carts of grain and fruit for the festival of Pentecost. An air of excitement hovered over the city, along with the sounds of the cooing doves and the bleating lambs on their way to the temple.

MATT: Jerusalem was always bustling on the day of Pentecost. People came from all over Judah to celebrate this festival. Sitting at a gate into the city or a marketplace provided an amazing sight. All sizes and shapes of people walked by. Mysterious languages touched your ears. Smells of exotic spices and herbs wafted before your nose.

JANEL: The commotion of adults talking, along with children playing and laughing, gave a special joy to the day. As people travelled to Jerusalem they sang praises to God to lighten their steps on the dusty roads. Their songs lingered in the air.

MATT: Peter and the rest of Jesus' followers had been in Jerusalem for many days. After the crucifixion and Resurrection, Jesus had instructed them to wait in the city for a special gift, the Holy Spirit. Today they too were excited and eager to celebrate Pentecost.

JANEL: On the day of Pentecost, Jesus' followers were all together. They spent much time praying together. Perhaps they were praying when it happened. For suddenly, it was no ordinary day, not even an ordinary Pentecost day.

MATT: A breeze came into the room where they were. The breeze got stronger and sounded like the rush of a mighty wind, filling their ears and the room with its sound. It was like being outdoors in a windstorm. With the wind came what looked like tongues of fire, little flames. The flames danced over the head of each person in the room, but no one was burned.

JANEL: When the wind and the flames disappeared, the people in the room found they could speak languages they had not spoken before. They found they could understand languages they had not understood before. This was the gift of God's Holy Spirit. This was the gift Jesus had promised them.

MATT: All this noise had attracted a crowd looking in the door. "They must be drunk," someone said. "And how can these people speak so many languages?" asked another. "Why, I hear that person speaking my language," said someone else.

JANEL: Peter heard the people outside. "Listen, everyone!" he shouted above the din. Everyone, the people outside the room and the followers of Jesus inside the room, stopped talking.

MATT: "We are not drunk. It is only nine o'clock in the morning. Remember what the prophet Joel said!

God declared, 'I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone. Your daughters and sons will have words from me. Old and young alike will dream marvelous dreams.'"

JANEL: Peter's words, the words from God, astonished everyone, the people outside the room and the people inside the room. Peter told them about Jesus and the promise of the Holy Spirit. On that special, unusual Pentecost, three thousand people joined the followers of Jesus.

## **Pastor Pastor's Reflections: "The Pentecost Connection"**

Well, I feel like I have to start out these reflections in the same way Pastor Art did and probably still does on many a Sunday – "What a week it has been!"

I was literally in another place and another state of mind this past week, as I traveled with my best friend Jack up the coast early Sunday morning making our way to the spiritual retreat center known as Esalen nestled in amongst the spreading oaks and coastal redwoods on the shores of the Pacific near Big Sur.

We found out quickly that we didn't have any cell phone coverage in the area and that there was very limited internet availability at the center. All of this quite intentional as all Esalen attendees are encouraged to disconnect and power down from any electronic devices during our time there. Something about connecting to our spiritual source instead of our technological one, I do believe. We were even encouraged to not use our phone to take pictures at certain times throughout the week, although I did manage to capture a few memories with the very valid reason, I thought, of helping me to remember where I was when I experienced such spiritual ecstasy!

So, it was a strange feeling to return home to the City of Angels late Friday night and then awake yesterday morning to a royal wedding I must admit I had completely forgotten was taking place and news of another massive school shooting that seemed all too familiar and tragic and senseless in a world that can seem to be going, as the old cliché would have it, "to hell in a handbag." Not that the Queen and her ever present clutch has anything to do with the state the world is in, of course.

And what, pray tell, Pastor, does all of this have to do with this most extraordinary day in the church calendar we call Pentecost? Can there possibly be any link between what we often call the church's birthday and the lives we lead in the present time no matter where we may find ourselves?

Well, yes, I think so. And it has a great deal to do with what I experienced this week as I roamed the wild hills and the majestic mountains that rise above the powerful Pacific ocean as we hiked 6 to 8 hours a day through sunlit meadows and their waving grasses at the top or made our way through dark forested trails shaded by massive coastal redwoods slurping up the moisture that winds its way in through the passes as it hangs in clouds or finds its way in through fog near the big creek below. And that is the "bring along" as our instructor would call it that called to me and stayed with me through this time and even now as I gaze out at wonderful you. And that is the word CONNECTION.

Even when we don't know what's going on in the rest of the world or even when we think we may be disconnected from our brothers and sisters we remain connected through this great web of aliveness through the Spirit that breathes through all of creation and makes us one.

I've always been fascinated and a bit in awe of this Pentecost story as Matt and Janel presented it so beautifully and in a fresh fun way this morning. Here are Jesus' followers, frightened for sure, not knowing what to expect or what to do in this time following His death and resurrection. What were they supposed to do? How were they going to go forward? Would they fracture and fall and start falling away from The Way?

In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as Rev. Stacy looked at it with you last Sunday, we hear Jesus fielding the frantic questions of the apostles as they wonder what will happen next and if "the time has come." And Jesus, as he so often did during his time on earth answers them as he would answer all of us to come afterwards with the words, "it's not for you to know times or dates that Abba God has decided," [Acts 1:7, *The Inclusive Bible*] encouraging them, just before he is lifted up in a cloud and taken from their sight, with the assurance that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and guide them.

So here they are, about 120, it says in chapter 1, coming together on the Feast of Pentecost known as "Shavuot" or the Feast of Weeks in the Jewish tradition, celebrating the all-important wheat harvest in the Land of Israel and the commemoration of the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah to the entire nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai (*Wikipedia*). A most appropriate day to be assembled and to receive the blessing of God's spirit in a new way as a new Law of Love descends upon those gathered in that upper room.

And how does the Spirit arrive? Why with a breeze that gets stronger until it sounds like the rush of a mighty wind – "like being outdoors in a windstorm" as Matt exclaimed. And with that wind, little flames – tongues of fire that danced over the heads of each person there, filling them with the fire of the Holy Spirit yet leaving their flesh unburnt.

And what happens next? People who could not understand each other's language before the wind and the fire were suddenly able to comprehend what each other was saying and make themselves understood to those who before had no idea what the other way speaking.

On Friday morning, as our group concluded our time together roaming the mountains and the beaches of the Big Sur area in wild contemplation (the name of the class), our instructor took us to the edge of yet another cliff where we could feel the wind whipping off the ocean and the fiery heat of the sun warming the tops of our

heads and we gave thanks to all that had brought us there as we offered our gratitude to the four classical elements of earth, water, fire and air. And in that moment I realized that this incredibly disparate group of people had all come together and been connected or rather, discovered our connection in much the same way the people gathered at Pentecost may have felt connected on that distinctive day. Although we had all come from different places around the world and had such different stories to share and places to protect we found a connection through a spirit of love and shared passion for this planet and for ALL of life that connects us not only with each other but with all the trees and plants and creatures and stars and planets and galaxies both known and unknown.

The day before I had thought of this church and our connection to one another and to all of creation as our wilderness group stood in the soft humus under the shade of a massive grove of redwood trees towering above us.

There our teacher told us about the ways in which these redwoods grow, as I'm sure a number of you are familiar with. As we looked around us, we saw many of these ancient trees' trunks blackened by fires which had swept among them over the courses of hundreds of years, some, of course, quite recently. And beside each of these blackened behemoths was a ring of younger trees which had sprouted up at the base of the fire ravaged tree as a reaction to its distress. When we looked about we saw that each of the largest trees was indeed surrounded by younger trees, some quite tall and others not so much, carrying on the legacy of the tree that it grew beside and sending out its roots to join with all the other trees in the area. We also learned that fire, as you might know, is actually beneficial to the redwoods as it promotes the successful germination of redwood seeds. A very Pentecostal affect you might say!

But the thing that impressed me most was their root systems. Although you might think such a tall tree would need to have very deep roots, these redwoods have shallow root systems that extend horizontally over a hundred feet from their base and intertwine with the roots of the other trees around them, creating a powerful thatch that connects each tree to the other and helps to provide nutrition and stability to the entire grove. Our teacher told us that when the loggers came in years ago and cut down so many of these tremendous trees, they would often leave one redwood as a "seed tree" but realized later that this was a fruitless process as that one lonely tree would soon be blown over by the powerful winds that swept up from off the ocean. Without its family of trees and its connected root thatch underneath, the single tree was no match for the windstorm that came upon it.

And so we rejoice in our connection today -- to one another, to those who came before us, to all of creation in all its various forms. Standing together we can nourish each other and discover where the Spirit is leading us. Joining together we create a network that holds us up when we go through the fires of our lives and feel the winds of storm and change rustling our branches.

I encourage you to keep sending out those roots of love that they may intertwine with those around you and embrace the fiery spirit that brings new life to all in these lives connected by the One who is our source.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to be led to a workshop and an instructor who, throughout the week, used the poems of my favorite poet, Mary Oliver, to lead us into nature and help us to consider our connection to all of life as I have spoken about it with you today. And so I shall leave you with one of her pieces today called

**“In Blackwater Woods.”**

Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars  
of light,  
are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,  
the long tapers  
of cattails  
are bursting and floating away over  
the blue shoulders  
of the ponds,  
and every pond,  
no matter what its  
name is, is  
nameless now.  
Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned  
in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side  
is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

("In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver,  
from *American Primitive*. © Back Bay Books, 1983.)