

“We Are Never Alone”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Pentecost Sunday – June 9, 2019

Acts 2: 1-21

This past week, a few of us from the church had lunch with John Franke, who is the theologian-in-residence at Second Presbyterian Church. John is going to be our All Church Retreat keynote speaker at Pyoca in September, and we are very excited for him being with us – look for more information in next month’s Tidings about his topic and then registration forms in August. Anyway, he wanted a chance to get to know us and John Knox a bit better, and so we showed him around the church and then went out to lunch.

Instead of getting in the car and driving to one of our more traditional American-style restaurants in Speedway, I asked the group if they were up for some Mexican food. And so, we walked across High School Road to Tacos 46. If you’ve never been, I would highly recommend it. Authentic, homemade Mexican food, very filling, and you can make it as spicy or as mild as you want. Yeah, there were a few bumps along the road with the waitress and our language-barriers, but that didn’t prevent us from having a delicious and enjoyable meal.

As I reflected on our lunch this week, I couldn’t help but think of how much has changed in our neighborhood and community in the last fifteen years. Yes, this shopping center across the street doesn’t have nearly the number of businesses that it once did. But the introduction of ethnic and international restaurants in our neighborhood is a clear sign of the burgeoning diversity of our community. And what was great last week about having lunch at Tacos 46 was to see who the customers were: white, black, brown, yellow – all skin colors were represented. Different languages were being spoken. You might have called it our Pentecost moment for the week.

Michael Jinkins writes: *In the 1990s, the late Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the historian and public intellectual, raised a concern about the looming Balkanization of American society. Tribal interests and ethnic identities, he feared, would unravel the fragile bonds of unity in culture. People of differing ethnicities, races, and languages crowded together onto the same small plot of real estate spelled trouble with a capital “T” for Schlesinger. He feared the kind of social disintegration that occurred in the former Yugoslavia and led to ethnic cleansing. “Unless a common purpose binds them together, tribal hostilities will drive them apart,” he wrote* (Michael Jinkins, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 14).

Our initial reaction to Schlesinger’s concerns might be that they were exaggerated and out of proportion. But to do so would be naïve and foolish. We are all too quick to point out what is wrong with a neighborhood – its declining home values, its rising crime rates, its poor school ratings – and

assign blame to the various ethnicities who reside in that neighborhood. We long for bygone days when things were simpler and more orderly, which can easily be translated as less diverse and more homogeneous. The rise of hate-filled groups in our country today is proof that Schlesinger's fears were not unwarranted (<https://www.npr.org/2019/02/20/696217158/u-s-hate-groups-rose-sharply-in-recent-years-watchdog-group-reports>).

And consider the anniversary the world remembered this past week. 75 years ago, over 160,000 Allied troops landed on the Normandy coast of France, the largest seaborne military invasion in history. Over 9,000 men died in the course of the intense battles; as one soldier put it, "As our boat touched sand and the ramp went down, I became a visitor to hell" (<https://www.dday.org/overview/>). That hell these men went through, and thousands died in, was necessary to stop hatred and evil from spreading further. Without the D-Day Invasion and the formation of a western front in Europe, it is hard to know how much longer it would have taken to bring an end to World War II and the Nazi Regime in Germany.

I have had the honor of visiting the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in France, as several of us from the John Knox Choir went there when we toured Europe in 2005. I have never felt a deeper sense of humility than when I walked through those pure-white marble crosses and Stars of David, so precisely arranged and meticulously manicured. For I know - and the world knows - that these men gave their lives so that the greatest of ethnic and religious eradications would be put to an end.

Rachel Donadio writes: *Before the Normandy invasion, the War and Navy Department issued "A Pocket Guide to France," with some useful vocabulary and a succinct analysis of the French character and mores. "They are not back-slappers. It's not their way," it said . . . and offered this advice: "No bragging about anything. Bragging is never more than a means of offending someone. No belittling either. Be generous; it won't hurt you."*

And then: "You are a member of the best dressed, best fed, best equipped Liberating Army of a former Ally of your country. They are still your kind of people who happen to speak democracy in a different language. Americans among Frenchmen, let us remember our likeness, not our differences. The Nazi slogan for destroying us both was 'Divide and Conquer.' Our American answer is 'In Union there is Strength'" (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/06/visiting-omaha-beach-d-day-75-anniversary/590788/>).

On this Pentecost Sunday, we are reminded that the differences we experience between one another will never divide us, because the Spirit will always bind us together in strength. As we read in Acts, the Spirit of God moved through the gathered disciples "like the rush of a violent wind," filling the house where they were staying. Tongues of fire rested on each of the apostles, and "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (2:4).

The Day of Pentecost took place during the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which is why so many Jews were gathered that day in Jerusalem from all over

the region. We hear of the many places they came from – but that significance is sometimes lost in the mundane reading of unfamiliar names and countries. Stephanie Crumpton writes: *People who spoke these languages heard accents and words in syntaxes that were familiar. As a result, they did not have to nudge the person next to them and ask, “What are they saying? What is that word? What do they mean?” Nor did they have to take on the shame that often comes with having to confess, “I do not understand.” They could hear the good news of God for themselves. No one had to abandon the culture that gave them an identity in order to hear from God. God’s word came that day in a way that expressed God’s deep affirmation of diversity as a key ingredient in unity* (*Connections: Year C, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2018: 329).

Just like there can be skeptics today, there were naysayers on that first Pentecost Sunday. While many were amazed and perplexed by all they were witnessing, “others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine’” (2:13). The critics saw disorder, messiness, unexplainable events, and wrote it off to drinking too much too early in the day.

That is when Peter, moved by the Holy Spirit, stands up to witness. Remember Peter? He’s the one who acts first and thinks second. He blurts out what’s on his mind without any filter whatsoever. He rushes out to meet Jesus on the open sea, only to fall neck-deep into the water. He is proclaiming Jesus as Messiah in one breath, and then refuses to believe Jesus would suffer as he foretold. Jesus says that he will build his church on Peter the Rock (Matthew 16:18), but then on the night before Jesus is crucified, Peter three times denies he knows Jesus. If there is ever proof that God will use anyone for God’s purposes, it is Peter!

And Peter responds to the critics and skeptics by saying: “Listen to me – all of you who live in Jerusalem. These people are not drunk – it’s only nine o’clock in the morning. No, what you are witnessing, what you are experiencing, was already foretold by the prophet Joel. Don’t you remember? The prophet told us that God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh – old and young, men and women, slave and free. And when God’s Spirit is poured out on them, they will prophesy, they will dream dreams, they will see visions. And on that day – on this day – everyone who calls on God’s name will be saved. It doesn’t matter where they are from, what they look like, who they love, what language they speak – for everyone who calls on God’s name will be saved.”

Peter’s testimony, which continues after what we have read today, is the witness which forms the church’s first new members’ class. Over one thousand people were baptized after receiving Peter’s message, “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:37-42). On Pentecost, God’s Spirit broke through all human barriers of speech, ethnicity, and division, and reaffirmed what Christ had commissioned the church to be and do: go, make disciples of all nations,

baptize in the name of the triune God, teach them to obey all my commandments, and remember I will always be with you (Matthew 28:16-20).

Pentecost is our confirmation that God will always be with us. On the night before he was arrested, Jesus promised the disciples that “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:25-26). This day is the celebration of that promise being fulfilled. This day is when we recognize that we are never alone in our lifetime of fulfilling the Great Commission. Jesus may have ascended back to the Father, but the Spirit is God’s Advocate who empowers each of us to live out our calling as Christ’s disciples.

How might we embrace the Spirit’s presence in our lives of discipleship? When we witness a family struggling to understand the English-directions in the store, do we ignore them, too wrapped-up in our own concerns, or do we stop and offer to help, realizing that we are never alone? When we step out of our comfort zone and try something new at church, like holding part of Vacation Bible School outside next week, do we worry and fret about all that might go wrong, or do we trust that in this new thing God is present, believing that we are never alone? When we face grief and loss and challenges and uncertainties in life, do we wall-off the world around us in an effort to protect ourselves, or do we receive the comfort and grace and love that God is offering through others, recognizing that we are never alone?

There will always be changes in life – people coming and going, births, transitions, deaths. There is nothing you can do to prevent those changes. The one thing that will never change – never change – is God’s love for you in Jesus Christ. And we know that love always and forever because God fulfilled God’s promise today by sending the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to teach us everything and remind us of all Christ said to us.

So, embrace the Spirit today. Let it move in your heart, your soul, your life, so that you may see visions and dream dreams. May you know that whatever life throws at you, you are never alone. And because of that, we have the confidence and the assurance that all God’s children are welcome this day – for all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.