

# Pentecost: Experience God's Presence in All

Acts 2:1-21 Romans 8:22-27  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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**The world is becoming more globally connected, while at the same time more tribally segregated.** I made that exact statement in my Pentecost Day sermon back in 2011. It's not only still relevant, but eight years later things we are even more globally connected and certainly more tribally segregated, especially politically.

We live in a time when our horizons are both expanding and contracting. Never before has it been so easy to be in direct contact with people from all over the globe. Right now, I'm currently in almost daily conversations on WhatsApp with a couple different people in Africa, one in Ghana, and the other in the Gambia. Even video telephone calls are free. We are learning so much about our different cultures, likes and dislikes.

In ways we have yet to comprehend, the notion of becoming "one global village" has become a reality right under our noses, and right at our fingertips. Historically, however, this became very problematic at times. **The rise of colonialism sought to wipe out the cultural and language differences in the countries they took over.** In this country we used Manifest Destiny (our version of American imperialism, and the belief that God was on our side) as an excuse to subjugate and at times eliminate the indigenous tribal people who lived in this country long before the European invasion.

The question remains, **why do we continue to be so threatened by differences?** Why do faces and names and places and languages and ideas and theologies and lifestyles that are different from our own bring such apprehension, fear, prejudice, and divisiveness? The divisive radical polarization in our political system is now almost unbearable. And it is making government at all levels more and more ineffective. And though a majority of us here at College Hill pride ourselves on our inclusiveness, the reality is that we are infused with a tribal mentality as well. Yet thankfully, we continue to remind ourselves that **unity doesn't mean uniformity. Differences can be maintained without requiring sameness.**

So here's the twist. Simply being aware of what makes us different from others, as in delineating our tribe from others, isn't a bad thing in and of itself. It's not only okay but **necessary to claim who and what we are – without the need to apologize for that.** That's one of the key lessons in understanding white privilege. It's about awareness that in the systemic culture of our country white people have always been favored over people of color. We see ourselves as the norm from which to compare all others. Being white, however, is not something to apologize for or feel guilty about. It is, in fact, something that many of us feel is part of our social justice calling to address, making

access to opportunity equal for all, whether white or persons of color. **In the process of judging how we differ from our neighbors, however, we must back away when simply making distinctions turns to being judgmental and condemning.**

The question I want to raise this morning is whether the biblical story we call Pentecost can shed any much-needed light upon how to deal with this human predicament. **What does Pentecost have to say about being both global and tribal?** The writer of the Gospel of Luke is the same author as the Book of Acts. This rather bizarre Pentecost story was Luke's way of explaining how the Presence of the Holy Spirit empowered that handful of fearful followers of Jesus to become a full-fledged movement, growing into what we call Christianity. We learn that as opposed to colonialism's attempt to force everyone into a common vocabulary, a single tongue, we see that God affirms the native languages of all the peoples. "The crowd...was bewildered," it says in Acts, "because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." **At Pentecost we see God affirm a diversity of tongues, hence a diversity of tribes. The Holy Spirit speaks through all languages, therefore every language is holy.** Isaac S Villegas, Mennonite pastor in North Carolina, writes in an article entitled, "Unconverted Difference":

**Pentecost invites us into a new way of engaging with difference**—not just with different languages, but with all the ways we are marked as different from one another. **At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit speaks through the differences, without converting them into sameness.** People aren't invited to give up their languages, their cultures, and convert to the same way of speaking and thinking... **Through the Spirit, difference is made holy.**

The author of this story (which progressives tend to believe was written in metaphorical language, not literal) quotes the Old Testament Hebrew prophet Joel, "I will pour out my spirit on all people" – not some, but all. Not in order to make everyone the same, but to affirm all people, to affirm where they came from, to bless who they are, to announce that what makes them different is good and holy. As a voice from heaven tells Peter later in the book of Acts (10:15), "what God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Here's the point, as Villegas states, "The Spirit affirms our differences, speaking in ways that each of us can understand—and yet drawing us together around the same table. "They broke bread from home to home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). **The miracle of communication that happened on Pentecost birthed a miracle of community, of communion.** To commune is to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and hope for the miracle of knowing God in a meal, in each other. Communion is an invitation to come together around a table and to let Jesus [the Spirit] stretch us into relationships with one another, with people who are the same and different, as we struggle to understand God, as we struggle to understand each other."

**Pentecost is the ultimate story of unity in the midst of diversity. It affirms both global and tribal.** Pentecost, then, is the ability to experience the Sacred Presence of God in all people. I encourage you to reflect this week upon a few questions:

- How global are you?
- How tribal are you?

- Who are the people you consider to be members of your "tribe," however it is you choose to define those boundaries.
- Who are the people you consider clearly not part of your tribe?
- As a congregation, how willing are we to embrace and accept people who would categorize themselves as coming from a different tribe as ourselves, especially theologically?

The great American poet Carl Sandburg wrote the introduction to a book entitled, *The Family of Man*. It included these words: "The first cry of a newborn baby in Chicago or Zamboanga, in Amsterdam or Rangoon, has the same pitch and key, each saying, 'I am! I have come through! I belong! I am a member of the Family.'"

**The Spirit at Pentecost is the same Spirit that was in Jesus, and the same spirit alive and working in, around, and through us today, calling us to unity and inclusivity, and not *in spite of*, but rather *because of our differences and tribal uniqueness*.** We are called to be both global *and* tribal. How we choose to live that out makes all the difference in the world.

Amen.

Resources:

Isaac S. Villegas, *Unconverted Difference* (Acts 2:1-21), [christiancentury.org](http://christiancentury.org)