

South Bay Community Church  
Sermon Reflection  
Diverse Unity  
4&5 June 2022  
Lead Pastor Tammy Long

Scripture Texts: Acts 2:1-12, Joel 2:28-32, Genesis 1:27-28, Revelation 7:9-10, Ephesians 4:3-7

**Sermon Preamble**

Happy Birthday! Today, we celebrate Pentecost - the birthday of the Church. Church means all followers of Jesus who are united as God's Family. As the Church, we are the family of God, empowered by the Spirit and witnessing for God's redemptive purposes to the end of the earth, wherever we may be. Today is our birthday because roughly 2,000 years ago, the Church was born at the Festival of Pentecost. As we face our challenges to live into Pentecost, let's explore the diverse unity that God models for us at the birth of the Church. You are invited to watch this short video by One Spirit – an initiative of South Bay Community Church and four other churches –

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JUJTMQWuIN-LVETNF2L0hJ6W2T3v84QDpDcQ>

**Pentecost - Introduction**

Pentecost is the third part of God's unfolding story as God redeems the world and establishes God's Kingdom. At Christmas, God gave his one and only Son to us as a gift setting in motion God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. At Easter, God the Son died so we could be reconciled with God the Father and experience a personal and intimate relationship with God directly. Bridging the gap between God and humanity, there were no more animal sacrifices or asking the priest to go to God for us. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and ignited followers of God with power to follow Jesus and expand God's Kingdom through the Church.

God's timing was perfect. Pentecost was one of three Jewish pilgrimage festivals; Jews and Jewish converts came from all over the world. The Pentecost Festival celebrated the beginning of wheat season and it commemorated God giving Moses the Law at Mt. Sinai. Even before the Holy Spirit came and birthed the Church it was a very significant event and celebration. Pentecost means fifty and its date was 50 days after Passover; This Pentecost was unique because it happened 50 days after Jesus' resurrection and ten days after Jesus ascended back to heaven. 120 followers of Jesus are in a room praying with no idea of what was about to happen. Suddenly, what sounded like roaring of a mighty wind, and looked like hovering tongues of fire on each follower, changed the world forever.

**Pentecost – What did it mean then?**

"They stood there amazed and perplexed. 'What does this mean?' they asked each other" (Acts 2:12). There are several ways to answer that question.

First, what Jesus said and promised was true. "During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, 'Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:3-5). Then, before his ascension into heaven, Jesus tells the disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That is exactly what happened, and Jesus' words are still continuing today. Reading the rest of the presentation in Acts, the Church was born that day. The Good News of Jesus spreads, and new converts by the thousands join the family of God. On the day of Pentecost, 3 thousand became followers of Christ. The witness spread toward the ends of the

earth. Jesus promised, for those who follow Him, a Helper, Counselor, and Comforter. The Spirit would come because Jesus would be leaving to prepare a place for us. The Spirit would guide in all truth, convict sin, abide within, and make known to us the will and way of Jesus. All of these promises Jesus said became true.

Second, Old Testament prophecy was true. “Then, after doing those things, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants – men and women alike” (Joel 2:28-29). Again, that is exactly what happened as Joel had described 500 years earlier. Pentecost means that God’s prophetic word, even as it continues to unfold, is true.

Third, it means that God is implementing God’s Kingdom plan for a community of believers in Christ, united by the Holy Spirit, but not in uniformity. Pentecost means the diverse unity of God’s beloved community.

### **Pentecost - What does it mean now?**

Pentecost means an invitation from the Holy Spirit to embrace Diverse Unity as the beloved community of God. As we unpack this more, there are two bookend scripture texts that place us at the beginning of time and the end of time. Everything God does is connected and has a purpose as part of God’s meta-story. All the pieces connect even when they don’t immediately make sense to us.

### **All humans created in the Image of God**

“God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it” (Genesis 1:27-28). That humanity was created in the image of God is referred to as The Imago Dei, which simply means the Image of God. Every human being was created in a way that reflects God. Even those who do not know Jesus, bear the image of God. Like children placed for adoption, in their very being is a reflection of the genes and tendencies of their ancestry. There is something that reflects God in each individual. There is an inherent sacredness in every person to be honored, valued, cherished, and respected simply because they are made in the image of God.

### **Diversity is part of our DNA as image bearers of God**

“After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, ‘Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9-10). Notice the vision God has given depicting the people of God gathered around the throne with such detail and specifying diversity. The writer sees people from every nation, tribe, people, and language. The inclusion of these details suggests that diversity was part of God’s vision for the Kingdom of God from the beginning; diversity is still present even in heaven.

Author Brenda Salter McNeil in her book, Roadmap to Reconciliation, wrote:

“The development of different culture didn’t take God by surprise! This is what the triune God intended from the beginning. Cultural differences and diversity were always a part of God’s original plan for human beings. When God commanded the first humans to “fill the earth” it was a decree to create cultures, because no one culture, people, or language can adequately reflect the splendor of God.” We need all cultural and ethnic differences to fully reflect God’s glory. Even then, we are only scratching a small part of who God is!

As image bearers of God, our Imago Dei encompasses our individuality, which includes diversity in ethnic identity as well. We see and experience the world through cultural lens. We are shaped and reflect our ethnic and cultural experiences. Similarly, we express ourselves through ethnic

and cultural expressions. Our ethnicity, our features, and our ways of expressing ourselves matter. God is at work in all and through all. “From one man God made every nation of the human race, that they should inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:26). No one culture can capture the fullness of the image of God any more than one person can reflect the fullness of God.

The Triune God is diverse. From before time, God existed in both perfect unity and perfect diversity as the Trinity. Each person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in their divine essence has a different role and function in carrying out the divine plan. One writer summarized this point as “in God there is unity without uniformity and diversity without superiority.”

Our ethnic and cultural perspectives are not perfect and are subject to God’s Will and Way just like everything else tainted by sin. There is beauty in our diversity to be celebrated because diversity reflects the beauty and glory of God. As we embrace diversity, we experience more the fullness of God in our lives.

### **Diversity in cultural bent is an important pathway for connecting with God**

Since we are ethnic and cultural beings, there is diversity in worship and the ways we experience God. We experience God both in ways that touch our hearts and reflect the breadth and beauty of God. Author Daniel Cho put it this way: “A person’s spiritual journey will not be as meaningful as it can be unless that journey is a familiar avenue by which to deepen faith and experience God in community in a way that resonates with the heart.” Some may feel the church they attend is missing their “heart song.” Their heart song may be tied to the culture that resonates with them. For example, in some African American, Indian, and Latin churches, there is something about worshipping in one’s cultural context that feels like home and is a person’s heart song. Worship in these cultural contexts often reflects a holistic worship that involves the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual person. There is often movement, emotional, and verbal expression that you may not find in other cultural contexts. For those to whom the culture resonates, it is home and their heart song; it is how they best connect with God.

Dr. King’s statement about Sunday morning church being the most segregated hour in America is often quoted. Dr. King is rightfully speaking against segregation, bigotry, and prejudice. For that reality, there is also the matter of one’s heart song and expression in the Kingdom of God. That is not to say that we cannot or should not be cross-cultural. One’s heart song can span different cultures, and some can find home in many cultural contexts. Indeed, we may find our “heart song” in another context that may not be our culture of origin. It is essential for the people of God to taste and see other cultural expressions even when it is not our heart song. Remember that no one culture, people, or language can adequately reflect God’s splendor.

As we open ourselves up to other expressions of God’s image in cross-cultural experiences, we may find we deeply appreciate and are blessed by the expressions of other cultures. Each cultural expression of worship, even if it is not our “heart song”, is a witness to the diversity of our God. Each contribution and gift to the Kingdom of God shared from other cultures and ethnicities is to be cherished, nourished, celebrated, and shared in furtherance of the Kingdom of God. Gifts in different cultural ethnic contexts are image bearers of God. Reading and understanding the Bible through different eyes, such as African American liberation theology, womanist theology, or through Middle Eastern perspectives is important because diversity is a special gift of utmost importance to God. There is so much God wants to share with us; one culture is too small.

### **Pentecost as diverse unity**

“And we hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done” (Acts 2:11b). This description of Pentecost is evidence that God loves diversity, like the diverse varieties of flowers and everything in nature. There were at least fifteen language groups that day, and everyone heard of God’s wonderful works in their own language. At Pentecost, God could have had everyone hear one language. However, God wanted to emphasize diversity, so the miracle of diversity of languages was a testimony and witness to diversity as representing the glory of God. The coming of the Holy Spirit in diverse tongues is a God inspired and empowered picture of diverse unity.

Diversity is within and part of unity. Diversity without unity is chaotic individualism. Unity without diversity is boring homogeneity. Unity is the parameter by which diversity can flourish to the fullest as the vision God has for the Church.

### **How are we doing with Paul’s exhortation for diverse unity in Ephesians 4:3-7?**

“Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all and living through all. However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ” (Ephesians 4:3-7). The Church has always struggled at unity from the very beginning. The divisions and fractures among the people of God right now is painful. The church has all kinds of painful divisions. Painful divisions include (1) not loving one another as God has commanded in celebrating and embracing diversity as a gift from God (2) in solidarity fighting injustice, racial prejudice, biases and bigotry that seek to deny, suppress, and dominate diversity instead of embracing and celebrating diversity. These painful divisions are among the people of God. It is particularly painful to those who have experienced oppression and expected something different from brothers and sisters in Christ.

Unless we do the following, we will be part of the problem and hinder the Kingdom of God manifesting in the way God is inviting us to live, serve, and share his love: (1) unless we embrace that everyone is made in God’s image and requires respect, value, care, and support particularly against injustice, (2) unless we embrace and affirm the beauty of diversity, recognizing that every person and group has something unique to contribute to the Kingdom of God, (3) unless we embrace that we are one in Christ and commanded to love one another in unity, not uniformity, and with diversity, not superiority, (4) unless we embrace and recognize we are fully dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit to live into these realities. Through the power of the Spirit, God invites us to love and live as God calls us to.

### **Five Challenges to Live into Pentecost**

- (1) Repent; acknowledge and confess any harms we may have done knowingly and unknowingly that has broken community inside and outside church walls.
- (2) Relate; chose to be proactive in humility, respect, and fostering true relationships across cultures, even when uncomfortable; live out the commandment to love one another.
- (3) Restore; seek to heal broken and strained relationships through grace, peace, and forgiveness.
- (4) Release: recognize we all have biases and prejudices that need to be identified and released for the flourishing of true community.
- (5) Rejoice; celebrate the gift of diversity, the gift of community, and the gift of humanity made in the image of God.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Sermon Preamble & Pentecost – Introduction

- Luke emphasizes the Jesus' command to disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:4-5, 8). Why would the mission of the early church not have been possible without the empowering by the Holy Spirit? Why is empowering by the Holy Spirit and choosing to follow the Spirit essential for our mission today?
- What differences would it make in our world if churches, such as the One Spirit Initiative, replaced painful divisions with unity while respecting diversity in living into the lessons from Pentecost?
- To assure the people of God's presence, particularly at the crucial time of Pentecost, God accompanied the Spirit's working by visible and audible signs, such as wind, fire, and inspired speech in Acts 2:2-4. How are you assured of the presence of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit whether or not you have supernatural signs?

### Pentecost – What did it mean then?

- The coming of the Holy Spirit and subsequent events in the book of Acts prove the truth of what Jesus had said and promised in Acts 1:8 and 2:3-5. What areas resonate with you as the words of Jesus and the Holy Spirit guide you in all truth?
- Pentecost, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon people, is specified in the Old Testament prophecy of Joel 2:28-29 and was fulfilled. In what ways does God's prophetic word continue to unfold and be fulfilled through the time of the second coming of Christ?
- In what ways has God shown the Kingdom plan for a community of believers in Christ united by the Holy Spirit? Why?
- In what ways has God shown the Kingdom plan for a community of believers in Christ not limited to uniformity, but embracing diversity? Why?

### All humans created in the Image of God

- How have you recognized the inherent sacredness in every person to be honored, valued, cherished, and respected because they are made in the image of God? How should this apply in relationship with those who you might consider an enemy because of different national origin, cultural identity, ethnicity, or views? How can this apply to those who have oppressed you?

### Diversity is part of our DNA as image bearers of God

- How does our Imago Dei, as made in the image of God, include our individuality and diversity? What does the statement, "in God there is unity without uniformity and diversity without superiority" mean to you? How does embracing and celebrating diversity reflect the fullness of the beauty and glory of God in our lives?

### Diversity in cultural bent is an important pathway for connecting with God

- How important to you is it to worship God in a church that expresses your "heart song"?
- Why is it important to open ourselves to other expressions of God's image in cross-cultural experiences, even when it is not our "heart song"?

### Pentecost as diverse unity

- As one lesson from Pentecost, why must unity in the Holy Spirit include embracing diversity?

### How are we doing with Paul's exhortation for diverse unity in Ephesians 4:3-7?

- In your observations and experiences how is the Church doing in avoiding painful divisions and binding together united in the spirit with peace?

- As part of the Church, what is especially important to you so that you are not part of the problem and hinder the Kingdom of God manifesting in the way God is inviting you to live, serve, and share his love?

### **Five Challenges to Live into Pentecost**

- To apply to good works the lessons for living into Pentecost, the following actions were listed: repent, relate, restore, release, and rejoice. Which of these actions resonate with you that you will apply to your life journey?