
All Together

Acts 2:1-21

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 22, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

In a recent medical study focusing on women, researchers concluded that “Frequent attendance at religious services was associated with significantly lower risk of all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality among women. Religion and spirituality [they concluded] may be an underappreciated resource that physicians could explore with their patients, as appropriate.” In light of this, I’m so glad you decided to extend your life today by being here together in this place and I expect to see you next week as well. This place that, as the choir sang, was made by God. This building is known as Duke Chapel but it’s really God’s Chapel, a chapel called “the most spiritual place in NC” by the Huffington Post. There’s something about this place.

This place, an icon of the university; this place, a living Christian church and community; this place, a sanctuary for all people at a major research university. This place has done what James B. Duke desired when he funded the building of this “great towering church”— “to have a profound influence on the spiritual life of the young men and young women who come here.” Duke Chapel has impacted and influenced thousands of people of all ages. Let me name two examples: A couple a years ago, I moderated a discussion panel in the Chapel celebrating 50 years of desegregation at Duke at the undergraduate level. The panelists included some of the first black students and trailblazers at Duke. One of the first black undergraduates, Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke, spoke of how during such turbulent times in the nation and on campus, Duke Chapel, and I quote her, “was a refuge” for her when other places were not. This place was and is a sanctuary. And just this past week, someone sent in this message: “It is difficult for my wife and I to attend church services with our autistic son. Accordingly, we stream a beautiful Sunday Service from Duke Chapel on the campus of Duke University. It is a wonderful and joyful service. ... My holy place is the Internet and I am thankful to those at Duke's media department who sustains this stream and brings us our Sunday ‘sanctuary.’” A sanctuary for all people, all ages. Whether in person or not, this place has had and continues to have a profound influence on people’s lives and we celebrate that fact here today. That’s why we’re so happy to be back in here.

There’s something about this place but even more so I think there’s something about the people in this place or the way this place has served people. The upper room in Acts would be of no significance if people were not in it, if the disciples were not all together in that one place. It’s not the same when this building is empty. The spires and stones are still in tact but without people, all together, it loses its human ministry and divine end and relinquishes its greater transcendent calling. Duke Chapel would solely be a museum of art, a satellite campus for Duke’s Nasher Museum of Art, if people were never found all together in this one place for worship and sanctuary. Without people it would make sense to worship the building and never God, but that’s not why it was built. It was built to have a profound influence on people’s lives.

The book of Acts emphasizes over and over again how people were together, all together. But to be together in one place doesn’t mean they were homogeneous. The miracle of Pentecost was that they were different and yet remained together, showing us how God is big enough to hold difference and differences. We may not be able to do it but God can. Like those on the day of Pentecost, some get perplexed over diversity and some even sneer. This motley mix disturbs the usual relational and social sensibilities which keep like people together to such an extent that onlookers think it’s LDOC, the

last day of classes at Duke, because they see what they think is a drunken frenzy at 9am in the morning. Some people see diversity as being drunk from sipping the libations of a secular ideology or political correctness when what it really is, is the gospel of God, a Pentecost ecology, the beauty of God on earth in one place because of the inspiration of the Spirit.

The miracle of Pentecost is that diversity and unity converge for a unified diversity. All of them were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in different languages but through each different language, all spoke of God's deeds of power. Some think Pentecost or diversity is about division but really you can only have unity if the members are diverse. Otherwise, all you have is uniformity not unity.

The church has always seemed to obsess over relatively small differences and used them to divide. Comedian Emo Philips makes this point very clear. He said:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!"

He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me too! Protestant or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me too! What denomination?"

He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me too!"

"Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" I said, "Die heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Uniformity means everyone looks the same, acts the same, and thinks the same and is the same kind of Baptist, but what uniformity really means is that we are just worshipping ourselves and not God whose beauty is embodied by multiplicity and diversity.

Pentecost is really about the unity of a diverse church. There's a common idea that diversity or difference or multiplicity means division and problems. But multiplicity is the context for unity in God. It's what makes unity possible, because without multiplicity there will only be constant conformity.

Sameness is actually more problematic than diversity because the latter is a gift of the Spirit, whereas the former suggests we are in charge. But, we are born into diversity and not even identical twins are exactly the same. When different people come together for worship that's a sign that God is at work. If diversity is absent we may only be worshipping a god made in our own image and then we might as well put on our tombstone epitaph "crown me with many crowns." There are people who can't handle difference of any kind and must only have it their way.

On a British Airways flight from Johannesburg, a middle-aged, well-off white South African lady found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the cabin crew attendant over about her seating. "What seems to be the problem, Madam?" asked the attendant. "Can't you see?" she says. "You've sat me next to a kaffir. I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another

seat!" "Please calm down, Madam", the stewardess replied. "The flight is very full today, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class."

The woman gave a snooty look at the outraged black man beside her (not to mention many of the surrounding passengers). A few minutes later the stewardess returned with the good news, which she delivered to the lady, who could not help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin. "Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I've spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class." Before the lady had a chance to answer, the stewardess continues, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, and I have had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it is outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With that, she turned to the black man sitting next to the woman, and said, "So if you'd like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you." At that point, many of the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation while the man walked up to the front of the plane.

When we think of Pentecost and the formation of the church, it's not about "my way" and personal biases, but God's way. Poet and priest Malcolm Guite writes that on Pentecost:

*... the gospel crosses every border
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace
... the lost are found in His translation.
Whose mother-tongue is Love, in every nation.*

God's way, God's church enacts border crossings, not the construction of walls. The way God builds the church, the people of God, is by diversifying. The church becomes the body of Christ, becomes more whole, more excellent, stronger, more faithful to the gospel, more beautiful, when it diversifies, when it isn't just locally clannish but global in scope. The irony is that the church unifies when it diversifies because there has to be diverse members of the body in order to speak of unity.

Many interpreters have viewed Pentecost as the inverse of the Tower of Babel scene in Genesis where the divided tongues brings confusion and scatters while at Pentecost divided languages brings understanding and unity centered on God. The church is born in and through multilingual proclamation. In God's hands the makeup of the church is diverse—the ancient church, the church today, and the church tomorrow. It is the future of Duke Chapel. The university has already transitioned from a regional college to a global university and the tongues of fire rest on the people of Duke Chapel, but the question is, will we speak? Will we speak our difference? Will we utter our distinct gift? Will we embody the tongue of our ethnicity or culture or gender or way of being in the world or will we succumb to the ecclesiastical police who want us all to be the same? If we don't speak our tongue and offer our gift from the Spirit we will not be the church God created but a church sacrificed on a homogenous altar rather than rooted and grounded in the unified diversity of the triune God.

Today is Trinity Sunday and we celebrate a God who is beautiful in diversity and unity, a God who is three unique, relational persons yet one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf argues that the church should be the image of the Trinity. If the church isn't diverse, it's not the church but a glorified social club. They were all together in their multiplicity. Diverse, yet one. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. All human flesh on whom the Spirit is poured out. Sons,

daughters. Young men. Old men. Slaves. Women. All flesh. They were all together in one place. This place.

But will you speak up in your own language? Will you speak your beautiful difference? Will you share the gift God has given you? Will you allow your gift to be released that we all, even in our diversity, might come together as one in Christ for the future of the world? Being together is key. There's a saying, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." That's why the testimony of togetherness at Pentecost is so powerful and distinct. They were all together but not all the same. They were all together and the good news exploded all over the world.

A story I told about Jimmy Durante a year ago at our last service in this place is still relevant. Jimmy was one of the great entertainers in the 20th century. He was asked to be a part of a show for World War II veterans. He told them his schedule was very busy so he could afford only a few minutes and do one short monologue and then immediately leave for his next appointment. The show's director agreed and was happy that he was coming even with his busy schedule. When Jimmy got on stage, something interesting happened. He performed his short monologue but then he stayed. The applause grew louder and louder and he kept staying. 15, 20, then 30 minutes went by. Finally, he took his last bow and left the stage. Someone backstage stopped him and said, "I thought you had to go after a few minutes. What happened?" Jimmy answered, "I did have to go, but I can show you the reason I stayed. You can see for yourself if you'll look down on the front row." He pointed to the front row and in the front row were two men, each of whom had lost an arm in the war. One had lost his right arm and the other had lost his left. But together, they were able to clap, and that's exactly what they were doing, loudly and cheerfully.

Together, we will be able to do a work that we could never do apart. Left and right, together. Liberal and conservative, together. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before God, together. Together we're able to be the diverse and unified body of Christ in the world. And when we are all together with our differences the environment is ripe for the Spirit to be poured out on us as God's people. The Spirit pours out on diverse *people* in one place, but not the place. A place, any place, this place is profoundly meaningful but the *milieu d'esprit* is the people, all people. Poured out on all flesh not on all construction sites, though there are many on this campus. As the final line in the responsive reading in the 1935 dedication service of the Chapel says—"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you?"—God dwells in you and how lovely is Thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts. You represent the geography of the Spirit as the Spirit draws together diversity in her tether to form unity. It is diversity that creates the possibility for genuine unity and fellowship in the triune God.

And when we are all together in heart, mind, and love this becomes a powerful witness in a world where diversity means division rather than unity. We can demonstrate how the Spirit blesses togetherness as a counter testimony to modern day tribalism and reveal the indiscriminate lavish love of the Spirit poured out on all.

This may not be the upper room but the Holy Spirit is blowing us into our diverse future. Are you ready? Let the fire fall. My name is Luke Powery and I approve this message.