

## **“Unity in the Holy Spirit”**

May 15, 2016

*Who Cares about Unity?* Series – Pentecost Sunday

Well, it's here. This is the day of the official vote about two congregations merging into one. Some of us have been thinking about this for longer than others. It was last August when the conversation started in greater intensity, and since then, we've met, talked, prayed, met some more, formulated documents, prayed, met, talked about what stuff we're going to move here from Lakeside - you get the idea.

First, I want to thank you for praying, for asking questions, for being open. I want to thank people who have been in on the details - gathering people together for prayer, making lists, getting information, talking through stuff. This is a big task, and all of us are a part of it.

And it's Pentecost, too. This moment when the promised Holy Spirit - the Advocate, the Counselor - comes upon the community of believers gathered together. It's an incredible account - the wind, tongues as of fire, many languages spoken - mysterious and odd enough that the people who are overcome by the Spirit are accused of public intoxication. But in reality, it's the movement of God in a new way!

Still there's a quickening of my heartbeat every Pentecost thinking about people waiting for what Jesus promised. It wasn't just the Holy Spirit, but the power that the Spirit brings - power, Jesus says, to be witnesses - all over the world. They weren't told how it would come, but they held on.

And I always wonder - am I ready for this? Would I be ready to receive the Holy Spirit? Would I be open to something new and different and amazing and transforming? I'll be honest - I like to know what's ahead. I like structure. I like predictability. But if we're going to be a part of what God is doing - it means change in routine, change in pattern, CHANGE - which isn't usually our favorite thing.

It's clear that folks weren't the same after the Spirit came upon them. They weren't scared and timid anymore; they were convicted and converted in a mighty way! They were bold!

I've been thinking about Pentecost as our global United Methodist Church gathers at General Conference. I've been praying that there would be a sense of the Spirit's presence - and the power that Jesus promises. I pray that all of us would truly affirm the faith we claim to have - that we believe in God who works in us and others by the Spirit. Those are the words we said together this morning.

I listened to a sermon from Bishop Greg Palmer, and he reminded us that our vocation - our calling - is to be full-time Christians. And in turn, the church is a full-time

church. There is no moment when we can ignore God's call and claim on our life. And though I embrace our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, it's not better slogans that will help us - it's trust in the Lord and obedience to Christ.

And I've been thinking about merger. It's no accident that we planned the official merger vote for this day of Pentecost. Sometimes we call it the birthday of the church, and other challenge us to consider how the Holy Spirit broadens our sense of who we are as those who go into the world to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ - the truth that God loves the world, that Jesus came to seek and save the lost, and that God desires all to be saved. The Spirit helps us to live what we believe.

The more I thought about it, I realized that Pentecost is one of God's great mergers - bringing people together and creating something new. Holy Spirit - divine energy - possesses the people, and they are inspired and transformed. Pentecost is the story of a new direction for the people of God.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come as he prepared his disciples before his crucifixion. And after Jesus' resurrection, after 40 days spent with his disciples, just before he ascended into heaven, he promised that the Holy Spirit would come and lead the disciples. He told them to wait in Jerusalem.

Now I know it was an opportune time - faithful Jews were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks - kind of like our Thanksgiving. But this is amazing! I'm sure you and I would be with those who witnessed it all saying, "What does this mean?" How it is that we can understand each other? What are we supposed to do now?

In all of our focus on merger, I've found myself listening more closely to news about business mergers - usually that means that one company is taking over. But for us, today, in the church, merger is about what God is doing - the work God is calling us to, the renewal, revival, and possibility that God brings. This merger is about possibility and our witness that God is not about keeping the status quo, but God is bringing new life and resurrection all the time. What is God going to do with us? How is God going to shape us, transform us, convict us?

I know you've been through a lot of change in the past few years. Vital Church Initiative has called us to make changes to be more effective in our mission to make disciples - and to be disciples - for the transformation of the world. And there was a change of pastors thrown in, too. We've experienced many changes.

But there's this promise - the proclamation from Jesus we have to hear - that when the Spirit comes you'll have power to be witnesses, to continue the work that Jesus does, to trust the Spirit to lead us to truth, to allow the Spirit to give us peace.

And there's this sense of unity that the Spirit brings. We're not talking about all of the believers being the same. What they had in common was their location - they were together in one place, it says. They were there to worship, and God showed up! No one was left out!

We can be together in one place and still not be together. Families can be together at home, but all engaged on different technological devices. As a church family, we can simply be here, but not be together. We can sit in these pews, but not be together. It's the Holy Spirit that brings unity. And we can feel the difference.

When we worship in Spirit and in truth, as Jesus calls us to do, then we feel that sense of God's presence in a powerful way. And I wonder how different our personal experience of worship would be if we expected the Holy Spirit to show up. How would we prepare? What would be different?

Pentecost is one of God's great mergers, and God continues to bring people together. Friends, you and I didn't plan this merger. We didn't start this. But more and more, I believe God did - or at least God is working to bring something good.

And I believe God can, because God has worked miracles in my life and in yours and in our brothers and sisters who worship over at Lakeside and in our larger church and in other churches and around the world! The church is still standing - not because of our beautiful buildings or because of just the right programs we offer, but because Jesus said we'd have the power of the Holy Spirit!

I'll confess, too, that I've never done this before. Part of a pastor's role is to shepherd - bringing people together, but I've never been a pastor when a merger happened. I'm grateful for Pastor Don's willingness to walk through this together - to all of you and to the people of Lakeside who have shown a depth of faith and trust in the Holy Spirit that is a strong witness.

I keep in mind that Jesus prayed for us - for the church in every time and place - and that unity is a gift of God. We can't produce it on our own. We seek unity in the Holy Spirit just like that day of Pentecost. Somehow the Spirit helped those gathered to claim the Gospel and share it. We can do no less! This merger is about the greater mission to make disciples for the transformation of the world!

And Jesus promises the Holy Spirit as a Paraclete - an advocate, a counselor, a comforter. The Holy Spirit has many roles in our lives! Remember that the unity that Jesus and God the Father have is a unity based on a common mission and message. And Jesus promises the Holy Spirit as the One who will remind us of Jesus' teaching and bring peace.

And the Spirit sends us to do what Jesus did. When we reach out to those who are left out, offer healing to those who are worn out, speak for those who are shut out,

help those who are thrown out, feed those who are emptied out, and speak truth to those who need to be called out, we're doing the work of Jesus. When you and I seek to be more like Jesus - to engage the faith we claim - we're living in the Spirit.

The power of the Spirit is real. Since Jesus ascended, since the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' followers have been using the power of God to heal, comfort, share, love and help - to make life better in Jesus' name. Pastor Joy Moore, a colleague of mine, said that Pentecost offers "a spirit-filled glimpse of a community where persons from every nation, every language and every community offer, in a language understandable to all, a unified witness to the presence and power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead."

That's who we are – witnesses to the power of God who raised Jesus and raises us to new life. And we celebrate unity in the Holy Spirit. The power to do the work that Jesus did - to continue his mission to show God's love to the world and seek and save all people. That's the gift we've been given. As we worship, as we gather, the power of the Holy Spirit is with us. May we celebrate it and give thanks for it. Thanks be to God. AMEN.