

**Sunday, May 31, 2020**

**Pentecost Sunday**

Pastor Sue McNicol – Aldersgate UMC

Butte, MT

**Scripture Reading:** I Corinthians 12: 4-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

**Sermon: *Church is a VERB...***

SPIRIT – our scripture today includes reference to “spirit” eleven times. It is at this moment as your pastor I realize I have just lost the attention of a few of you. You are frantically fact-checking today’s reading and ensuring my count is accurate. On point with the message of first Corinthians – we all have different gifts – some count words, others listen for content and a few paint pictures as the words unfold in their imagination. We are all uniquely created yet formed in one image – the image of God. Isn’t that refreshing to hear?

So where does “Spirit” fit into all this? Today is Pentecost – and Pentecost is all about the Holy Spirit. The term Pentecost comes from the Greek “pentekoste” meaning fiftieth. It refers to the festival celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover. Pentecost commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus while they were in Jerusalem celebrating the Feast of Weeks, as described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:1–31). Acts 2 depicts the Holy Spirit as the rushing of wind and dancing of flames...springing up something new among these followers of Jesus. There were devout Jews of every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem and as the spirit blew through, they were all speaking their native languages, but in that instant, they also understood one another. At that precise moment, they were aware something strange and wonderful was happening. The Holy Spirit was breathing new life in and around them – as one body, they were being rebirthed with joy and thanksgiving at all their diversity, their difference and even their disagreement. They were forming as one church.

Not as a physical church with walls, and pews and an altar, but as a body of believers coming together around one agreement. An agreement of their belief, and our belief, about the essence of God. A trinity comprised of Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit...God as the Creator, Jesus Christ as God made real among us, and the Holy Spirit as God through us – all of us serving as God’s hands and feet. To put it another way – the Holy Spirit is God lived out as a verb, not a noun. We are the church as a *verb*.

Time for a quick linguistics refresher. A noun is simply described as a person, place, or thing. Verbs are words that show action (sing), occurrence (cultivate), state of being (exist). When we hear the word “church” do we envision a building (noun) or a movement (verb). Herein lies the essence of Pentecost – we are called to *be the church*. To move, blow, flicker, and dance just as the Holy Spirit was made known to those early followers.

The apostle Paul writes about the Spirit’s work through the believers as “gifts.” The root of this word points to the nature of these gifts: the gifts (in Greek - *charismata*) are the result of God’s grace (*charis*). The gifts of the Spirit are active, experienced instances of God’s grace at work in the church. Today’s scripture goes on to name many of these grace-filled gifts – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, interpretation of tongues and

discernment. But let us not skip over a particularly important lesson in Paul's epistle. He clearly states all believers are given such gifts of the Spirit. It is not something that happens to some believers and not others. In other words, he is saying *everyone* brings gifts to the body – to the church. The gifts described in today's reading may seem far-reaching for some of us...working miracles, prophecy, and interpretation of tongues. However, Paul lists spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8 as well – gifts we perhaps consider characteristic of ourselves and others in our faith community – gifts of ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership and compassion.

Discerning our spiritual gifts requires a shift in thinking. Gifts of the spirit are not simply talents required for us to “get ahead” or “earn a wage.” Paul wants the Corinthians to embrace a new way of looking at their gifts. He is challenging them to see their abilities as a way of serve God and to advance the entire community. We are doing spirit-filled work when we transform our talents into expressions of God's love.

Finding ways to share our gifts with others has been a challenge lately. We have been experiencing a major shift in how we experience church the past few months. Our building has been closed to protect all of us from the threat of illness. And as part of this requirement, we're experienced other types of dis-ease- loneliness, depression, anxiety, fear. It's extremely difficult to share comfort, fellowship and ministry when we are physically cut off from one another. And yet, the body of Aldersgate UMC used their gifts to become church outside of walls of their building more so then ever before. Herein lies the verb analogy. Church these past few months has been full of action words – calling, writing, sharing, preaching, teaching, coloring, praying, loving, giving...on and on it goes. The Holy Spirit blows through the believers, not the building. Have you even considered trying to contain wind – trying to trap it into a confined space? It's not possible. I believe that is the lesson in today's reading – we can't confine or contain the spirit of God – we must allow for movement, action, and change to happen if we're to be alive in our experience of God.

I welcome the opportunity for us to gather again as a faith community and to celebrate our shared love of God in common space. But let us not forget, there will always be those who are not in our physical presence but are just as present as members of this community. Pentecost

is a celebration of the birth of the church...and now more than ever, it's a reminder we are to re-birth the church time and time again as we grow in our understanding of what it means to *be church*. I'd like to ask that we begin a new tradition when we *Pass the Peace* during worship. We have always been free to turn to others and share expressions of peace with handshakes, hugs and well wishes. This practice will need to change given current health precautions. So, let's take this opportunity to recall what our time apart has shown us. We now know what it feels like to be separated from our fellow congregants and unable to partake in these practices. Let's extend the Passing of Peace outside our walls. Let's include expressions of blessing to those who may not be with us. The homebound, those who have passed, or perhaps those we have yet to meet. Each week, I ask we name someone who is not in our physical presence as a reminder these walls do not define our church. I'll begin...Peace be with you Olive!

Go in peace this week to share your spiritual gifts – Amen.