

## Pentecostal Polyphony

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday, (June 5) 2022

Kyle Childress

Luke tells us that the disciples were all in one place waiting and praying. In the first chapter of Acts, Luke says there were the original 11 plus the new guy Matthias making 12. But also there were women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, plus other disciples from a larger circle than perhaps we normally think about. Ten days before Jesus had told them to go back to the city of Jerusalem and wait and pray until the Holy Spirit came upon them. Then he ascended. For these ten days they had done just that: waited and prayed, prayed and waited. Together in one place.

Could you give up control and wait and pray together like that? For ten days?

Suddenly, without warning, came this sound. You could hear it coming, a kind of roar, and then it hit. A mighty wind blew through the house. Papers scattered, candles blew out, windows and doors were blown open, dirt and dust everywhere, people grabbing stuff, covering their faces. And then some kind of fire appeared in the wind. Not one big fire, as if something had ignited from the candles and set the house afire, but more as if some sort of flame rested upon each and every one of them.

They begin to excitedly talk about what is happening and discover they are speaking and hearing in different languages. Languages they didn't know they

could speak while at the same time, hearing one another and understanding one another like never before. Someone would speak in Aramaic, “Is this the Spirit of God Jesus foretold?” and someone else who was a Greek speaker would understand what was said and speak in Greek, “This must be it!” And a Latin speaker would understand the Greek and the Aramaic but respond so that a Parthian and someone speaking Egyptian could all understand. Everyone is in excited conversation with each other and each understanding. A Texan shouts, “What in the ‘sam-hill’ is going on?!” and a Minnesotan replies, “You guys, this is the Holy Spirit!” and they understood one another. A straight White guy asks, “What is happening?” And a lesbian woman understands and responds, “I think God is up to something; let’s find out.”

Peter stands up and interprets for the crowd of onlookers who is gathering. The outsiders have never seen such a thing before: wind blowing through a house but no wind from outside the house. Flames of fire everywhere and people excitedly shouting and talking to one another in different languages. Are they all drunk?!

Onlookers, Jews gathered from around the known world, who are all in town for the Jewish festival of first fruits, known as Pentecost, gather trying to see. Peter stands up and explains that “No, we are not drunk; it’s only 9:00 in the morning. Indeed, this is what the prophet Joel said would happen during the last days when God will pour out God’s Spirit, and young men and young women will prophesy. All this is happening because of Jesus of Nazareth whom you crucified, and God resurrected.”

Luke says that many of the onlookers were cut to the heart and said, “What should we do?” In other words, this news connecting what they are seeing in front of them with Jesus of Nazareth with the ancient prophecies from their Bible, demand some kind of response. “What should we do?”

Peter says, “Repent! Turn from your old ways of living. Give up your assumptions and open your hearts and minds to the God we know in Jesus. Forgive and receive forgiveness, receive the Holy Spirit, and be baptized.

And Luke says, many welcomed this news and were baptized. Indeed, about 3,000! Not bad for one day – the first day of the church.

Luke goes on to say that his diverse crowd of people from all over the known world, who speak and understand one another, who discover they can trust one another and count on one another, who receive one another and embrace one another, all devoted themselves to listening to the apostles’ teaching and breaking bread together and prayers and they were becoming one “koinonia” – one fellowship, united and bound together in one people. Luke adds that they began to share and have all things in common – that same word, koinonia. Oneness, commonality, communion...

In February 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer is in a Nazi prison exchanging letters with his best friend, Eberhard Bethge, who is a soldier at the Italian front. Both write of their sense of the “fragmentariness” of life. Life is experienced in fragments, bits and pieces, each piece isolated from others. They go from one thing to another, but each thing is disconnected from the other. They live uprooted lives. Pulled apart. Anxiety. Fear. Depression. Discouragement. Disconnected. Nothing

makes sense. They can send and receive letters, but they do not know anyone. Bonhoeffer cannot receive visitors.

Among Bonhoeffer's many talents and accomplishments, he was a classically trained pianist and knew and played music very well. In his letters he reaches back to his musical background and says that the life of discipleship in Jesus Christ is a kind of "polyphony of life." In music, in polyphony, more than one melody is played or sung simultaneously, each moving to some extent independently of the others. But a central cantus firmus, a fixed melody, is played amid the other melodies giving coherence, connection, and a kind of unity in diversity that allows all the parts to flourish. Each flourish but only in connection with the cantus firmus.

This polyphony is the hallmark of baroque musicians, and no one was better at it than Johann Sebastian Bach, who wove various melodies and musical lines all at the same time, while having one central melody continuing throughout the piece, eventually bringing everything together.

Much of the same kind of thing happens in jazz, though the terminology is different. Great jazz musicians can weave and improvise with one another, going this way and that with their music, all the while staying in touch with the central melodic theme.

For Bonhoeffer, God is at work in our lives in much the same way. There are all kinds of things and all sorts of people in and around us. Much of it is experienced as fragments, disconnected from anyone or anything else. Yet Bonhoeffer said that Jesus Christ crucified and risen is the cantus firmus for the

Christian, and the Holy Spirit takes our fragmentariness and coheres them into a polyphony around this cantus firmus.

Cambridge theologian, Jeremy Begbie, who is also a trained musician, says we are called to be a polyphonic people. He says that at Pentecost, disciples who are otherwise closed in upon themselves, isolated and separated because of language differences, cultural distinctions, and the further isolating, separating influence of fears, injustice, and lack of trust find themselves open to one another and open to God, because of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. In their openness to God and to one another, they begin to experience trust and the stubborn divisions of the day are subverted. People become responsive to one another, they listen to one another, tuned into one another. Differences are not erased but celebrated and all enhance one another while the central cantus firmus, Christ crucified and resurrected, keeps everything and everyone together (Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*, p. 269-271).

We are going through a lot of changes right now – within our church and certainly without. Isolated and hunkered down for a couple of years with Covid, we are beginning to emerge into a different world. Old things we relied upon or accepted or assumed seem to be falling apart. There is much pain and hurt and at the same time, anger, and defensiveness. Toxicity seems to be both without us and within us. Some of us are changing jobs and moving away while others of us are changing jobs and moving here. Many of us are feeling our age and needing to step back while others of us are being encouraged to step forward. The financial giving in the congregation is down as we all deal with upheaval and change. All of this means a lot of shifting and changing both inside and outside of our church, and we do not know what it all means or where it is all going.

Last week, though we did not make anything out of it, at her request, was Dr. Miki Lynn's last Sunday with us. As we've already said, we invite you to write notes and cards and letters to her thanking her for her years of faithful service and beautiful music.

Miki was the best I know at improvisation. She had an uncanny ability to know the best music to sing for the occasion no matter how disruptive the occasion. She was so well rooted in her music; she could improvise out of that knowledge and do the right piece at the right time.

There were times when she and I would do a sermon together. She would stand at the back with my sermon script in hand, and a stack of music on her music stand. What I could see and you could not, is that while I was preaching, she was going through the stack of music. Thumbing this way and that as my sermon continued closer and closer to her cue. Still, she kept looking at music back and forth while I was one paragraph away from her cue, then one sentence from her cue. Then bingo! It was her turn! And she would sing acapella! And every time, it was the perfect music for that particular moment in the sermon.

We will miss her. At the same time, next week we will welcome Victoria Cole, a graduate student at SFA, who will come to lead us in music. She's excited and nervous and we look forward to working with her. I ask you to be sure to welcome her and encourage her.

Lots of changes. And from all I read, our so-called new normal is going to be change and fragmentariness. In all this we can become more and more defensive and build walls and hunker down. Or we can be open and receptive.

So, this morning, hear me on this: When we are well-rooted in the cantus firmus, Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, other melodies do not threaten us. Instead, we learn to improvise with them, as God's Holy Spirit, weaves the various melodies into beautiful music.

Sam Wells, senior rector at St. Martin in the Fields in London tells the story of a concert by a great pianist. The concert hall is full, people are excited and anticipating. But from the second row, a child gets lose and starts running around, eventually running up on the stage to the Steinway Concert Grand piano. She sits down and starts playing chopsticks. The crowd is not impressed, and some people are angry. Where are the parents? Someone do something! And someone does do something. The great pianist walks out and stands behind the child who is continuing to play oblivious to anyone else. He leans down and whispers, "Keep playing." And then he begins to play on the keyboard around her, improvising extraordinarily beautiful music with the child's chopsticks.

God's Spirit has come and continues to come, with fresh winds of newness and hope and healing. Let's be open to what God has for us!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.