

Acts 2:1-21

## **Amazed and Astonished**

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The month of June is upon us. For many, at least here in Northern Ontario, but most of Canada as well, June means planning for summer, whether it be holidays or just warm days on a bench or at a window. The colours of summer are to be enjoyed. It is a time for rest and renewal. If you watch the news, are aware or involved with different groups, you may also know that June in Canada is designated, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Pride Month as well as National Indigenous History Month. If you were living in the U.S., you might also celebrate Immigrant Heritage Month, National Caribbean American Heritage Month and Black Music Month.

Each of these designations celebrate the diversity of our humanity, from gender, to culture, to heritage. These celebrations help us to appreciate what diversity there is in people from their colour, to how they experience the world, their music, their food, and so much more. Diversity is a gift given to us. Sadly, we often see diversity as a threat, something to be feared. We see difference instead of diversity. Difference makes us adversaries. Diversity, when celebrated, brings unity.

Today is also a celebration of our creation through World Environment Day. The diversity of the environment from mountains to rain forest, desert to streams, oceans, plant, birds, and animals, all show the diversity of a creator who did not need everything to be the same in order for there to be meaning, purpose, beauty, even if it can also bring challenge and struggle.

Today also marks the third festival in the Feast of Weeks, the Jewish Festival of Shavuot. This Jewish holiday occurs on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan. In the Bible, Shavuot marked the wheat harvest in the land of Israel. A Jewish holiday that has double significance, it marks the wheat harvest and commemorates the anniversary of the day when the Jews received the Torah at Mount Sinai. The day is also called Pentecost by those who celebrate the Jewish Festival.

When we look at the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the people gathered in Jerusalem in the New Testament, we miss that this story is told on the day of Pentecost for the Jewish faith. The early Christians, used the name Pentecost to mark the birth of the Christian church. The Jewish faith commemorates the anniversary of the day when they received the Torah, and we celebrate when the church received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Torah is also important to us as to it belongs the first five books of the Old Testament, the law of God as revealed to Moses.

Another connection that you may not have caught between this very Christian experience and the Hebrew scriptures is that when Peter starts to preach, he is using words from the prophet Joel. He says so himself at verse 16 and then reciting Joel says, <sup>17</sup>'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy...<sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

What is striking about this text is that the prophecy from Joel was all about the diversity of people who will receive and call on God's name, and that in Acts the people gathered in Jerusalem were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. We heard the names of the many people and their backgrounds within the reading. And when the Holy Spirit came calling attention to its presence...to God's presence in that moment...with what sounded like the rush of a violent wind and then an unexplainable visual described as divided tongues, as of fire, appearing among them and a tongue resting on each of the Christians gather in a house, it caused all of them to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

We are told that the languages they spoke allowed for the people gathered, who were originally from many different places, to hear about "God's deeds of power" each in their own language and it was amazing, but also astonishing and perplexing. So perplexing that the Christians were accused of being drunk at 9:00 in the morning. So unexpected and unexplainable was the experience that people were perplexed and astonished. Still, that did not stop those hearing their language being spoke from being amazed.

Here was diversity in all its glorious abundance. The diversity of people and language could have been a dividing and defining factor in how people lived together, experienced the world together, but in God's world this experience showed that God did not expect every one to be the same, in was a defining factor in a new way. God's word was brought to people in their diversity of language and experience. Through the Holy Spirit, God brought unity as people heard about God's deeds of power in their own language.

Think about what it feels like to hear you own language if you are traveling. You don't have to go far. I remember Ken and I travelling from Toronto to Thunder Bay and stopping in communities in Northern Ontario where the language spoken is French. Neither of us speak French, so even ordering a hamburger was challenging in one fast food restaurant. On another trip, when visiting Quebec City, it was a relief when the waiter spoke to us in English. Not that we were not enjoying the diversity, but to understand in our own language was so meaningful. There is comfort and assurance in hearing our own language. I think it may have been that way for those who heard the message of God in their own language. It is why the work of translating the Bible is so important for people.

But the knowledge of God in our world, of God's deeds of power, allows us to learn about Jesus and his teaching, preaching, healing, death, resurrection, and ascension, that was all for us. It is here that we learn of how to love one another in our diversity, to celebrate it, and continue Christ's work in the world. As Christians we can celebrate Pride Month and Indigenous History month, looking first at how we have not shown God's love to both those groups of people, acknowledging that, and then doing all we can to show and be God's love in the world.

Pentecost is about diversity; it is about how the image of God is found in people and places very different from ourselves. As Michael Jenkins writes in a commentary, "the image of God is not something that adheres to the singular individual, as though God were a windowless monad, singular and distant, in whose image we were created in arrogant isolation. The image of God in which we were created is the image of the triune God of grace."<sup>1</sup>

Our God is one in which people of different backgrounds, whether it be heritage, gender, race, economic standing, or ability, are celebrated as made in the image of God. May we spend today and the days to come celebrating our diversity as made in the image of God. May we learn from and love one another as Christ loved us. All have value, all are made in the image of God. As the church on this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the abundance of God in humanity and in creation and may our words and actions of love once again amaze and astonish the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Jenkins, Michael. *Feasting on the Word: Year C Volume 3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2010. P.18.