

## **Message for June 5, 2022**

### **Pentecost and Communion**

**Genesis 11:1-9**

**Acts 2:1-13**

While driving down to Omagh last Sunday, Susan and I were talking about how much Milton has changed in the past fifteen years or so. There are of course the physical changes with the building of so many new subdivisions and warehouses, but there are also many cultural changes as well. We can think of languages for example.

At one time English was *the* language spoken by the vast majority of Miltonians. To be sure other languages were heard but they made up a small proportion of those spoken. Now however we hear all sorts of different languages whether we be on Main Street, at the Farmer's Market, Walmart or anywhere else. According to the latest statistics that I could find, English is still by far the dominant language and is spoken by about 70 percent of the town's population. Without getting bogged down with the numbers, other languages that are now commonly spoken in Milton are, in no particular order, Urdu, Punjabi, Spanish, Polish, Chinese, Arabic and Tagalog to name a few. Truly we now have a very multi-cultural and multi-lingual community and this is said to be the key to our growth and prosperity or, as the slogan goes, "our strength is in our diversity". While this may be our attitude though, such was not the case in the ancient world and that is reflected in this morning's first scripture passage.

Thousands of years ago when people tried to account for all the different languages and cultures in the world, they did so by telling a story. According to this story, there was once a time when everyone in the world spoke the same language. The people were nomads and traveled all over until they reached the plain of Shinar, which is in modern day Iraq. They decided to settle down there and then they invented something with tremendous implications for the future: they invented bricks. Now this may not seem to be all that spectacular to us, yet it was. Up to this point the people had lived in tents but now they could build all sorts of permanent structures. And what did they decide to build first?

A great big tower, one that would reach all the way up to heaven itself. They thought that everyone would be so impressed by this marvel that they would never want to move away, but that's not the way it turned out.

According to the story, God came down from heaven and when he saw what they were doing he remarked, perhaps humorously, "Behold they are one people and have one language and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them". To stop the people, God decided to confuse their language and since the people could no longer communicate with one another, they were unable to complete the tower. God then scattered the people across the face of the earth. This is how people of long ago accounted for the world's many different languages and cultures. From their perspective, multiculturalism and multilingualism were not a blessing but rather a curse. They represented separation and division, but as the Bible tells us, even as God separated us so too has he brought us back together again; he did so in that famous event that we remember today.

Today of course is Pentecost and is the day when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit. According to Luke, the disciples were gathered together in one place when suddenly the room was filled with a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. Then there appeared what seemed to be tongues of fire that touched the disciples without hurting them. Once they had been touched by the flames, the disciples started proclaiming the glory of God in all sorts of different languages. This was the beginning of the Christian church but Pentecost also marked something else: it marked the reversal of the Tower of Babel episode. The human race was divided at the Tower of Babel but at Pentecost we were brought back together again. Unity was restored since we are one in our faith in Christ. In the words of the campfire song, "we are one in the Spirit". Or at least that is the ideal.

When we look at the world around us it often seems as if there is far more Christian disunity than unity. To be sure there are a number of ecumenical organizations that seek to break down the barriers that have long separated the various branches of Christianity but, despite all of their good work, the barriers remain. We can consider the number of denominations for example. Despite all the ecumenical work, there are more denominations in the world today than ever before. And even within the various denominations there is division as well. We can think of our own for example.

We, along with hundreds of thousands of others in this country, call ourselves Presbyterian and at one time we had a lot in common. It didn't matter where you were, if you walked into a Presbyterian church on a Sunday morning you knew what to expect, ranging from how the minister would be dressed, to the hymns and the order of worship. There were of course local variations but not many. Such however is no longer the case. Some congregations like ours are traditional in style while others are anything but. We use an organ while others use a keyboard, guitars and drums. We sing from the 1972 Book of Praise while most congregations use the 1996 version. Many others in fact don't even use hymnbooks at all, preferring to sing more modern hymns projected onto a large screen at the front of the church.

The differences though aren't just confined to the way in which congregations worship. They are also reflected by what congregations believe. Last year's General Assembly for example said that marriage may now be understood as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or else between two consenting adults. It is up to the Sessions and ministers to decide which definition they believe to be true, and there is total freedom of conscience in making the decision. Not everyone of course agrees with this, and this issue is one of many that the General Assembly, which begins meeting later today, will have to wrestle with.

Truly whether it be in our own denomination or in the larger church, there seems to be far more disunity than unity. Looking back to that special Pentecost Sunday though, one thing that we ought to note is that when the disciples started proclaiming the glory of God, they did so in all sorts of various languages. Pentecost did not make the linguistic and cultural differences disappear. What Pentecost did do however was put the differences in their proper perspective. Whether it be cultural or theological, we Christians do have some very real differences but even so, they are still outweighed by what we have in common; our common faith in Christ and our commitment to him. We are one too because of God's love for us, and there is no greater reminder of this than the sacrament that we are about to celebrate.

We Christians have many different understandings of what Communion means, and we most certainly celebrate it in many different ways. Some denominations even restrict who can receive communion, saying that you must be a member of their denomination in order to partake. The differences are very

real but even so, the vast majority of Christians by far obey Jesus' command to celebrate Communion and "do this in remembrance of me". Despite all the differences surrounding Communion it still binds us together. Let us now then celebrate the Lord's Supper, affirming that we are still one in the Spirit, bound together by God's love for each and every one of us.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Hear us as we turn to you in prayer on this late spring morning, this first Sunday of a new month.

We thank you for this month just barely begun, with its long days and short nights. We thank you for the opportunity this time of year gives us to spend more time outdoors. We thank you for the life and the growth in our gardens, fields, and orchards. We thank you for everyone and everything that adds so much to our lives. Above all we thank you for the holy wonder that is you, the source of all life in all of its glorious abundant fulness, now and forevermore.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we thank you for what it is that we remember and celebrate this day: the coming of the Holy Spirit. We thank you for all that this means, that through the Spirit you called your church into existence. We pray for your one holy church, and we especially pray for our branch of it as the General Assembly begins meeting later today. We pray that through your Spirit you will bless and guide the Moderator, the Clerks, and all of the commissioners as they wrestle with the contentious issues before them and try to chart the way forward.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we thank you that through the Holy Spirit you are always with us, no matter where we go, what we are doing, or what may be happening. Help us then to put our faith and trust in you.

We pray this day for your comforting and healing presence in the lives of all those who are hurting. As we so often have, we once again pray for the sake of the people in Ukraine.

We give you thanks this day for the life and service of the Queen as she celebrates seven decades on the throne, praying for your continued blessing upon her.

In your Son's name we pray. Amen