

## Christian Perspective on Race and Diversity

Acts 2:5-13

This morning we are continuing our walk through the book of Acts, and the passage we'll be looking at is extremely timely and relevant for our day and age- the current hot topics of race and diversity. Pastor Dave a couple weeks ago got us started looking at this wild event we call Pentecost. Pentecost is a Greek word, basically meaning fiftieth. I had mentioned earlier that Jesus' followers had met with Jesus up in the region of Galilee, and then had returned back south to Jerusalem, most likely because 7 weeks after the Passover celebration, there was another Jewish celebration known as the Celebration/Festival of Weeks, or the Celebration/Festival of Harvest. This Jewish holiday also became known in Greek as Pentecost, being that it happened 7 weeks after Passover (7 weeks, 50 days, Pentecost meaning fiftieth), and it was a time to celebrate the harvest of wheat, to thank God and remember Him specifically for His provision. You might equate it to how our modern-day Thanksgiving Celebration started- feasting with family, friends, neighbors- in thanks to God for the food goods harvested.

And so, what would happen is that, Jews from all over would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover- Jews from villages all over Israel, and even Jews from all sorts of other countries, would all come back, and those who came from far would often stay in Jerusalem for Passover, and then remain there seven more weeks so they could also celebrate Pentecost. It was like a 2-month homecoming for God's people every year with a special feast at the beginning (Passover) and then at the end (Pentecost). And so, it was on the day of Pentecost, the homecoming-ending-day feast of thanksgiving for the harvest- that God showed up with extra-ordinary power amongst His people.

Now before we take a look at our passage for today, there's a couple things I want to point out from the first few verses in chapter 2 of Acts. Notice in [verse 2](#) the word "*suddenly*." This word conveys to us that the Holy Spirit is free and not conjured up by our own efforts. In Acts 1 we don't see the early church attempting to conjure up the Holy Spirit that was promised to them, but rather they were meeting together, praying together, considering God's word together- and God's presence suddenly showed up. The Holy Spirit is not bound by anyone's timing or technique for tapping into God's power. We follow God's instructions found in his word for how to live, and we pray asking for His presence to be with

us and to guide us and we ask Him to show up in powerful ways and to do powerful things that only He can do. We live lives that are inviting for the Holy Spirit to work in, and we *verbally* invite, asking God to show up in unexplainable ways; but we cannot force His spirit to come. When He comes, He comes *suddenly*- on His terms, according to His ways, and according to His timing.

Next, I want you to consider the imagery of the tongues of fire in [verse 3](#). Throughout the Bible there is an association between God's presence and fire. There's the calling of Moses at the burning bush, God's leading of His people through the wilderness by a pillar of fire, the descending of God's presence in the form of fire on Mount Sinai, fire coming from Heaven and consuming the offering at Solomon's temple dedication. The people were even commanded to continually have a fire burning 24/7 inside the temple, most likely as a reminder of God's 24/7 refining, holy presence with them. Now with this in mind, think of the implication this brings us, as we consider this fire appearing on each one of Jesus' followers there that day. The people were used to going to the temple to see the fire there, reminding them of God's presence, but now that presence rested on each of them as they gathered collectively. God's people are now no longer defined *just* by attending a location such as the temple (or a church building) where they would hear God's word proclaimed- no, *we* are now to be His temple where *we* proclaim His word wherever we go. This is further symbolized by the fire not being little bonfires resting on each of them, but rather a "tongue" of fire, a single flame that resembles the shape of a human tongue, the tool we use to speak.

And speak they did. In a miraculous way, God enabled them to speak on this specific day, for this specific time, to all those who spoke different languages, from all different cultures and countries, who had assembled there in Jerusalem. It was like a supernatural jump start, that was necessary for the good news of Jesus to spread quickly throughout the world. Let's read the description of this event. ([Acts 2:5-13](#))

People from all different nations and cultures, were gathered in Jerusalem. Jews had dispersed themselves, moving because of business, or as a result the exile to Babylon many years before, or as a result of the recent Roman presence in Palestine, etc. A portion of God's people had spread out and assimilated into different countries of the world, but would come back to Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals. And there were even people from these foreign countries who had

chosen to leave their own cultural religion of their native country in order to follow the Hebrew Creator God. Even these who were not Jewish by DNA, were now coming to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem during this special festival. People from the places we now call Turkey, Italy, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, countries in Northern Africa, islands off of Greece, and more. Now, we don't know if verse 5 is a bit of a hyperbole, an exaggerated statement, just aiming to convey the general, grand idea that there was a ton of people from all kinds of countries, or if it really means literally *every* nation at the time. Also, we might consider that during the time of the Bible, the term "nation" wasn't quite as rigid of a defined term as it is today, with our well-defined national borders and militaries, kings, presidents, etc. And quite possibly there were many other nations represented on this day and the author Luke just mentioned many of them, but not all- either way- there was obviously a lot of cultural and linguistic diversity, yet what brought them together was one thing: Was it their humanity? Was it their color blindness? A social agenda? No, they were brought together and unified spiritually, through worship, celebration, and acknowledgement of the one true LORD God, the one who had created them in His own image, according to their own uniqueness, and had given them salvation and provision.

That is the unity that is needed today. The world will never achieve unity through laws, social programs, military or political alliances, through Republican or Democrat agendas. We must acknowledge that we are image bearers of our creator. We must humble ourselves and recognize that no matter the color of our skin, we each somehow reflect the likeness of the God who created each of us. And we have the choice to function more accordingly to His image, or function less accordingly to His image. As we function more accordingly to His image- to His attributes, characteristics, His truth, His ways- as we humble ourselves and confess where He is right and we are wrong, as we obey the teaching of Jesus- loving God and loving others- then there is peace, unity, rest, blessing, and invitation for God's Spirit to show up suddenly and powerfully. But, when we function *less* accordingly to His image- when we don't pursue His attributes, characteristics, His truth, His ways- as we feed our own pride and selfishness, as we defend our own rights and rightness, as we ignore the teaching of Jesus- not loving God nor loving others- then there is friction, chaos, turmoil, struggle, and we quench the fire of the Holy Spirit before He even gets close to coming down upon us.

Notice in this passage, God's desire for all these nations, for all the nations of the world, to hear the "mighty deeds of God," as [verse 11](#) puts it. God loves mankind, all of mankind who have all been created in His image. In the book of Revelation we are given a glimpse into what God's heavenly Kingdom will look like one day, [chapter 7 verses 9-10](#) say: *"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all the tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"* In order for heaven to look like this- filled with people from every nation, tribe, people, and language- this event in Acts had to happen, and God's church around the world continues to replicate this event by sending out those who will carry His message to others of different cultures, beliefs, nationalities, and languages. The Creator of this universe, desires to unify His creation, mankind- He wants to heal us from injustice, hatred, prejudice- but that will not happen apart from His creation turning to Him in repentance and receiving Jesus as King. There is brokenness in our governments, in our laws, our political parties, in our systems worldwide. The cause of the brokenness of our world, is that individuals, groups of individuals, businesses, corporations, governments, nations, even churches- have sinned against God, and have not sought the unity that can only be found through the transformative work of Jesus Christ. He is our only hope. The Bible tells us that sin, (going against our Creator- disobeying Him) is what causes brokenness in the world. The only race we are to blame is the human race- we are each guilty and in need of Jesus' forgiveness and rescue. And the message of One Church is not just two churches coming together, but rather our message is that- unity in Jesus reaches across social and economic lines, across denominational lines, across multiple generations, across cultures, languages, borders- and that unity brings purpose, peace, fulfilment- and ultimately results in God glorified and His people blessed. Repentance is what this world needs- a turning to God for forgiveness, healing, and instruction- is what every individual, every race, every nation and culture needs.

It's not just within this moment of Pentecost that we see God's heart for the nations, this is not the first time we get a glimpse of God's desire to unite people under His authority. Even before the nation of Israel was formed, God was already conveying His message of hope for all nations. God called Abram, telling him to leave his own country to go to another, and said *"I will make you a great nation...*

*and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Gen 12:2-3)* It was through Abram, who became known as Abraham, through whose descendants God formed a nation, that was to be a nation *for the purpose* of blessing all the other nations. Years later, after Abraham’s descendants had multiplied, and Israel had been formed, they became enslaved in Egypt. The people of Israel were treated horribly at the hand of the Egyptians, and yet, when God freed his people- there was still opportunity for the Egyptians (and others from other nations) to join them. [Exodus 12:38](#) tells us that when Israel left, a “mixed multitude” also went with them. This mixed multitude, made up of Egyptians and other nationalities who were living in Egypt, became Jewish- not because of their blood and DNA, but because they recognized the one true God and chose to forsake all other identity in order to be known as the people who followed the LORD God.

That’s really where you and I need to be. Forsaking all other identities, titles, history of origin- in order to be counted among the people group who follow the LORD Jesus. A citizen of the Kingdom. That’s how the Bible describes the nationality of the followers of Jesus. [Ephesians 2:5-6](#) describes us being dead in our transgressions- that’s our original origins right there- dead because of the disease of sin, *but we are “made alive together with Christ,”* for He has *“raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”* [Philippians 3:20](#) says it even clearer *“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

You see, ultimately the promise to Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations of the world was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who not only died for the Jewish people, but died for every human being no matter what the nationality. We just looked recently at Jesus’ command to all His followers, to go and *“make disciples of all the nations.”* I think sometimes, in our day to day lives, at best we maybe remember Jesus saying to *“make disciples,”* but I think we often forget that He said to *“make disciples of all the nations.”* The question for each of us, if we claim to follow Jesus, is how am I personally attempting to fulfil that command? That might be a little convicting for each of us, right? We need to ask ourselves, and ask the Lord- how can *I*, and how can *we* as One Church, be intentional in obeying this command to make disciples of all nations? If it is the Lord’s desire to unite cultures, peoples, and nations under His authority, what role are we to play in accomplishing that?

The world has ideas about how to accomplish that unity as well. Unity apart from God, is no new idea either. In Genesis chapter 11, before Abraham is even mentioned, we read that the world was uniting in order to build a city and a tower that would reach the heavens. The people were aiming to make a name for themselves, and it appears they were doing so selfishly and pridefully for themselves, building and working and aspiring together- with the Lord being completely absent from their minds. And the scripture says that God came down and confused their languages, and so scattered the people all over the face of the earth. The place ended up being called Babel (meaning confuse) because the Lord confused the language of the people.

What a wild parallel. There's the tower of Babel where we have the people turning *away* from the Lord- and the result was *confusion* in communication and *disunity*. And here in Acts 2 we have the early church turning *to* the Lord and the result was *clarity* in communication and *unity*. Now I'm no rocket scientist, but I think the lesson here is that if we want to see unity, we must turn to the Lord. Turning to Him in repentance, and seeking Him in His word, and letting Him love people through us. In contrast- if we get selfish, prideful, and ignore our God- surely confusion and disunity will be our experienced result.

As we seek community with one another and with those around us, I know that we often gravitate toward individuals who are like us- like us as in sharing the same interests, or as in being of the same age bracket or similar season of life- and that is awesome- I hope you find common ground and community with many in these areas; but I also want to encourage you to seek community and learn from those who are *different* from you, even in this very building. To be willing to learn from others who are older, younger; who have kids, who don't have kids; who are new in their faith, who have walked with the Lord many years; who wear a mask, who don't wear a mask, etc. Part of God's plan, of His people being in community, is sanctification. Sanctification being defined as the process of becoming more holy, more set apart- it's the process of becoming more like Him in our thoughts and actions here on Earth. If we've received Jesus into our lives then God already sees us as holy and perfect in His Kingdom, but sanctification is the process of us becoming more holy and perfect in our day to day life here on Earth. And God's desire for us in relational community is that we would be challenged, stretched, refined, sharpened- as we gather together, placing our differences aside, so that we can continue being sanctified- in order that we might

glorify God together as His church. Even the relationships that rub you wrong, are a God sent opportunity for you to be refined, and more sanctified in your relationship with Jesus. And then I want to challenge you to look *outside* the walls of this building, in order to see all the different people from different walks of life, from different cultures, from different nations of origin- and consider how the Lord wants to use *you* to speak to them, of the “mighty deeds of God.”

In closing, I want you to look at [verse 13](#) again... Here was this great work of God taking place- people hearing and understanding God’s good-news-message in their own heart language- and yet, there were some that mocked this event. I want to warn you that even as God is working and moving- even as His people are making good God honoring choices, doing good God honoring deeds, and seeking unity- there will still be critics. You will be judged by this world for your parenting decisions, your convictions at work, your life choices, who you befriend. Even in all the beauty of two churches coming together, who are envisioning the body of Christ experiencing greater “oneness”- even as that is taking place, there will be mocking critics. It’s ok though, next week we’re going to look at Peter’s defense as he addresses the mockers with God’s word- and may we learn to do the same- making all our decisions based on the guidance and parameters God gives us in His word, seeking the unity that only He can give, so that we can live confidently and always have the defense of His word backing us no matter what the world may say.