



KALAMAZOO

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

June 4, 2017

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

***The Gift in Being Ourselves***

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On Pentecost, we celebrate the birth of the church, made real in each individual moved by the Spirit. "I am the church, you are the church ..." as our children just sang. The gift of the Spirit lives not in a select few, but in every person through all our distinctions. As St. Paul imagines it ... hear what God's Spirit may say to us.

{1 Corinthians 12:4-13}

One of the great joys in life is children growing into their special gifts. They come alive, they become who God created them to be. Gifts of personality, interests, and abilities ... or not. Who knows where, in God's grace, my beloved children will end up? Right now, some of my greatest delights are discussing international politics, economics, and passion to make the world a better place, calculating engineering aspects of life, anticipating Drum Corps this summer, listening to drum rhythms from the heavens (that is, his bedroom above us!), or cuddling with animals on the couch while sharing whatever comes to mind. I remember fondly: books, Lego bricks, and walks together not so long ago. Even as I imagine future possibilities and can't wait to celebrate different places they'll go, people they'll become, and perspectives they'll offer.

Do you know what I mean? Even if we don't have young kids of our own right now isn't one of the great pleasures of church life together witnessing blossoming personalities of so many other children—your children, our

children—and sharing everything from baptisms to graduation parties? Today we celebrate all that kids learned in another program year. And friends, like them, isn't there a miracle of beauties and possibilities we long for in ourselves and all people, as each person discovers and becomes who they were meant to be?

Authenticity. That's what we seek ... amid superficiality, or pressures to conform, or the simple pace of change that can seem disorienting, disconcerting. Isn't it compelling when we connect with people we trust really mean what they say, really care, really just try to be who they are without pride or pretense or even worry about perfection? Authenticity is me being me, you being you, without comparative judgment. No proving better or worse. Rather me being me as a way of welcoming, inspiring, connecting with you being you. With authenticity we accept who we are, recognize what we can do, claim our own dreams, not egotistically seeking, defensively perseverating on what we can't do, or who we aren't.

Let's be real, don't we all struggle at least a bit? Insecurities linger. Fears get fed. Oh, the horrible tragedies innocent children suffer—wars, oppressive poverty, childhood abuse whose wounds and scars still hurt into adulthood. And a child, despite being loved, who for whatever reason still feels anxious, inadequate, and makes poor decisions ... who doesn't want to help, just hug it all away if we could?

Maybe that should be our qualifying exam for teachers or shepherds—something like hugs! More than knowledge of scripture in the mind, how's the heart? How compassionate and patient are we? You see, don't all the lesson plans, fun and frustration, go beyond Bible stories? When I used to do children's sermons, a child wisely remarked, or more like wisecracked:

“we know the answer is always God, Jesus, or love!” Maybe I was too simplistic. Or maybe at heart living faith is that simple. Here, we emphasize things like “we all belong to God.” That’s the important core. And from that comes something more. Living faith begins with knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. So if we want children to be all they can be, if we want to nurture authenticity, in the end, isn’t it about helping children receive special gifts of life each has been given? And again, don’t we all face that challenge? From earliest memories through endless new epiphanies? Amid all our experiences, interests, abilities, and achievements, I wonder: can we see a revelation of Sacred Grace that created us and Holy Love that continues to nurture us?

That’s what the Pentecost story is all about. We celebrate God’s Spirit of life and love in all people as unique as language we learned as a kid. Peter stresses that even children possess gifts of faithful witness. Paul cites examples of spiritual gifts that vary in each of us. He was talking about church. And it’s true in all of life too—varieties of gifts from the same Spirit. I like how Marilyn McEntyre sees gifts as divine invitations. We grow authentically into whom God created us to be with our particular gifts when we receive them like a happy child, in trust and openness of heart. Then we live with ever renewed dedication, deeper understanding, and delight.<sup>i</sup>

And then we come to see, that the gift in being ourselves gets completed, gets fulfilled in relationship. At best, me being me is about cherishing Divine gifts of identity and purpose, and then offering them to benefit others as God intends. If we remember our best presents ever received, what comes to mind? *Now friends, see that in ourselves, who we are, we possess even better gifts—our teaching, healing, everything else Paul lists and more. And*

*in being ourselves, we become a gift for others, Paul stresses, for the common good.*

The trouble in Corinth was people were more concerned about competing for being the best and most important. But you see, friends, in the Pentecost experience, and in Paul's exhortation we see that full authenticity gets manifest in community. Beyond the simple gift of life and breath itself, the holy miracle comes alive in necessary variety and beautiful synergy of our particular gifts. No one possesses all gifts. So we need one another. We need to be part of life beyond our selves. Like languages we learn as a child, all we do can express good news of God's loving presence, the power of Sacred Grace to bring fullness of life in peace for all. We accept the Divine invitation to be and become all we can be. It's precisely not just for ourselves, rather so everyone who seeks God's love in their lives might know salvation!

As I talked with her this week about discoveries in her own life, somehow we got around to Adam and Eve amid ethical concerns we all share. How God created each of us in goodness ... and then the rest of the biblical story twists and turns through plots thick with tragic selfishness and undeserved suffering. Yet Redeeming Love ever calls us back to who we're created to be, ever calls out what God created us to do—to cultivate life abundant for all people and creation. As I share life with you in that Spirit in so many ways, it all makes we wonder. Do our Divine gifts of personality and purpose always remain the same? What if our gifts seem clear, but ways to use them don't materialize immediately? Beyond some immutable absolute, can our gifts evolve? Do they change with circumstances? What happens when we seem to outgrow a certain ability or interest? What about when we have to trade in our racket or clubs for a cane? Or after an illness or injury we just

don't feel the vitality we once did? What about when things don't just fall into place; and we struggle to know what to do with our lives?

As I imagine Pentecostal winds and flames moving among us and listen to Paul, a few things come to mind. First, if no one can do it all, then we must learn and accept what we can't do. True discernment of gifts and purpose necessarily includes awareness of our inabilities as much as our abilities, our disinterests as much as our interests, things to which we're indifferent as much as our passions. Second, maybe the question about how to be ourselves is best answered by also asking what's needed in community life together? It's both a challenge—that is, God calls us look beyond our own mind and skin; and it's a promise—we can trust that God is always with us and will help us find holy purpose amid our very human lives. Dear friends, I believe that from our first breath to our final sigh, every one of us has gifts to be shared in love for the good of all! Amid all our reflections and calculations, we open our hearts to God and to one another. Marilyn McEntyre encourages us, to move beyond fear, loss, regret, to receive the kingdom, the reign of God's love as Jesus says, like a child. Like a happy child opening a gift, surprised and delighted by new opportunities, maybe even beyond our imagined possibilities.<sup>ii</sup>

I can remember as I first grew into adulthood, how I wanted to have my five-year plan and ten-year plan all laid out. It's a nice idea. And don't we soon find out that life rarely goes according to plan?! Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection were not exactly what the disciples planned or even imagined. Then there's Pentecost when that Divine power and purpose comes fully into them. And friends, see that more than single day, Pentecost is a whole season, it's a way of living faithfully. It's a way of discovering ever more who we can be. Yes, maybe our interests, abilities, personality beauties and

quirks get shaped at an early age. Yet friends, however young or advanced our years there remain discoveries ahead of us if we have eyes to see. There remain divine gifts in our lives and our world every day, if we have the heart to accept them.

And so we have children singing in worship. We have Connor sharing the gift of musical reflection during our offering. We have our Syrian family's children joining other refugee children a couple of nights ago to make music unimaginable in the crucible of their lives not long ago. Today we celebrate all the growth of children and educational leaders over the past year. And even more than particular gifts of knowledge and ability our children learn, I hope they, like all the rest of us, catch the Spirit of ongoing awakenings; feel flames kindled in our hearts for continuing epiphanies during the rest of life ahead; sense a hunger for joy and peace only fully filled in Holy Love.

After worship we will share the delights of our church picnic, filled with the culinary gifts each one brings to the table. And in a few moments, we'll come again to this table, where the sacramental gift of Grace awaits because Jesus invites us to be here. Just as we are. In the fullness of who we are and who we still discover we can be.

On this Pentecost day, we'll share together one more gift. As we prepare to accept God's invitation to abundant life in all we can be, a few of our friends will lead us in the Lord's Prayer in the native language they learned to speak as a child. Our voice, our language ever remains one of the most authentic expressions of ourselves, the gifts we have to offer. As we pray together, may we open our hearts to seek God and to trust in God, each of us cherishing our gifts or seeking others as we may feel called in this moment. Receive the gift of love offered completely, never bartered conditionally. The

gift of love that makes all our others come alive. The gift of love we can return, by passing it on to others. Here in all our beautiful variety, Christ makes us one, teaching and empowering us all to live and bless others with love in words and in all the deeds we express!

Thanks be to God. Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Marilyn McEntyre, *Word by Word: A Daily Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 25.

<sup>ii</sup> McEntyre, 24-25.