

**Day of Pentecost C – June 9, 2019 – Sarah D. Odderstol – St. John’s  
Acts 2.1-21 – Psalm 104.25-35, 37 – Romans 8.14-17 – John 14.8-27**

What holds us together? In a very literal sense, our skin holds us together. Our skin is our largest organ and is known as the integumentary system. Our skin is what gives our bodies integrity. Skin keeps us whole and undiminished.

We cannot see and touch gravity like we can our skin. But gravity, like skin, holds us together. On a planetary and cosmic level, gravity is a force that keeps creation whole and undiminished.

You don’t need a medical or a physics degree to figure out that it takes more than skin and gravity to hold people together. Devout Jews, both in Jesus’ time and today, believe that The Law is what holds their people together. The Law, Torah, keeps them whole and undiminished.

Pentecost was a Jewish holiday long before Pentecost became a Christian holiday. The Feast of Pentecost, or Weeks, as the feast was known in the Hebrew Scriptures, originally marked the end of the spring harvest. The feast was celebrated fifty days after Passover and came to commemorate the giving of the law at Sinai. Before they received the law, the Jews were a nomadic band of liberated slaves. Having lived in slavery in Egypt for hundreds of years, they had long forgotten how to order their own lives together as a people. Slavery bound them together, but slavery certainly did not make them whole or undiminished. Jews celebrate receiving God’s gift of the law for the law provided a healthy way to hold their people together. The law brought integrity to their relationships with God and each other.

Centuries passed between that day on Mount Sinai when the Jews received the law and the day that Jesus was born a Jew in ancient Palestine. During that time the law went from being the Ten Commandments to including over six hundred laws that were intended to govern the ways that Jews related to God and to each other. The law held people together, but the law also squeezed some people out. For many, the letter of the law had become more important than the spirit of the law. Widows, orphans, the poor, those living with chronic illness and non-Jews were viewed as less worthy or unworthy of God’s love and mercy.

Christians believe that Jesus was sent among us to restore us to unity with God and each other. A devout Jew, Jesus never asked people to abandon the law. Jesus embraced the law and challenged those around him to reclaim the spirit of the law: love God and love your neighbor...love what God has made. He taught that the law is intended to include not to exclude – that all people are worthy of a relationship with God. Jesus called together a community of followers who attempted to live the life that Jesus modeled. Jesus’ life and ministry was marked by relationships of integrity – relationships that called people to wholeness and left them undiminished.

None of us have to stretch our imaginations very far to touch the grief and loss that Jesus' followers must have felt after Jesus left them. Even with their spirits buoyed by the miracle of the resurrection, I would bet the disciples still felt pangs of abandonment when Jesus ascended to heaven. Although Jesus had promised them an Advocate to be with them until the end of time, they likely wondered what would hold them together without Jesus to lead them.

Then as Jesus' disciples gathered to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, a mighty wind and tongues of flame fell upon the disciples. The disciples found themselves empowered in new and mysterious ways to proclaim the gospel and God's forgiveness to all people. Even Peter, the disciple who publicly denied Jesus, became a bold preacher. For the followers of Jesus, Pentecost took on a new meaning, the heavens had opened and something new and wonder-filled was happening. Although they could not see and touch the Holy Spirit in the way they had done with Jesus, the disciples found in the Holy Spirit the inspiration and integrity that would hold them together and draw others to join them in Jesus' mission to restore creation to right relationship with God.

Historically, biblical scholars have talked about Pentecost as God's intervention to reassemble the peoples God disbursed in the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel. According to Genesis, the people of Shinar – Babylonia – wanted to make a name for themselves by building a great city and a tower with "its top in the heavens." God disrupted the work by so confusing the language of the workers that they could no longer work together. The city and the tower were never finished and the people were dispersed over the face of the earth. Traditionally, this story has been understood as a lament about lost primeval unity and an explanation of the vast multiplicity of human languages set in the context of a morality tale about what happens when humans attempt to storm the heavens and displace God.<sup>1</sup>

Modern scholarship reveals a different story: the story of the Tower of Babel is about the importance of peoples' uniqueness and the horrors of totalitarianism. Today's rabbinical scholars propose that the building of the city NOT the tower per se is what provoked the divine displeasure.<sup>2</sup> So why does the construction of a city disturb God so much? The punishment that God metes out to the builders offers a clue. We are told twice that God scattered the builders over the whole earth. This seems an odd punishment given that God has previously twice blessed humankind – both in creation stories and in the story of the Great Flood – to "be fertile and increase, and fill the earth."

God had made it clear that the divine vision for humanity is to spread out and fill the earth, yet the builders wanted to stay put, to congregate in one place. In fact their resistance to God's blessing is clear: they explicitly declare their intention to build their city, and the tower within, out of fear "lest we be scattered all over the world" (Gen. 11.4). You'd think God would be happy that the people wanted to stay together, what was the problem here?

The issue lies in the difference between unity and uniformity. In Hebrew, the Babel story tells us that the builders all had the same words. Rabbi Naftali Netziv wrote over 150 years ago: “God was not distressed by what they said, but by the fact that their words [and by implication, their thoughts] were the same”. God finds unanimity alarming, because total uniformity is necessarily a sign of totalitarian control – after all, absolute consensus does not happen naturally on any matter, let alone every matter.<sup>3</sup> In scattering people and multiplying languages, God offered the world a path toward God’s intended blessing.

So what is God the Holy Spirit up to in the Pentecost story? Notice that the Holy Spirit does not restore a common language to the peoples of the earth, rather the Holy Spirit grants humankind the ability to maintain our uniqueness and yet communicate and understand one another. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit calls us back to the path of God’s intended blessing.

There is a wonderful confluence of events concurrent with the Christian celebration of Pentecost this year. Last week marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and the beginning of Pride Month. I hope you noticed as I did the very intentional effort made to celebrate the contributions of all people who participated in the success of D-Day: in addition to those who stormed the beaches at Normandy, African Americans, Native Americans, women, and the LGBTQ community were honored. Alan Turing’s work to break Nazi codes turned the tide in the European theater of World War II, but he was persecuted for his sexuality. Turing was finally given the obituary he deserved on Friday. On Thursday, the New York Police Commissioner apologized for the violent police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, in 1969. I see the Holy Spirit’s fingerprints all over these events, prodding us toward the path of God’s intended blessing...a journey towards wholeness that leaves us undiminished.

In just a moment, we will renew our Baptismal Covenant. Baptism is the skin that holds the Christian faith together. The Baptismal Covenant is woven from the Apostles Creed – the founding story of Christianity – and the promises that are signposts taken from Jesus’ life and ministry that direct us toward the path of God’s intended blessing for humankind. Our baptismal identity is not a set of directions; instead we are given a map where all roads lead back to God...whether you take the super highway or the cow path. In baptism we are sealed with the Holy Spirit – we never, ever, travel alone. We will, with God’s help.

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<sup>1</sup> Shai Held, “The Babel story is about the dangers of uniformity.” found at <https://www.christiancentry.org/article/critical-essay/the-babel-story-is-about-dangers-uniformity.org>

<sup>2</sup> Held.

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<sup>3</sup> Held.