

My favorite place in the world is a place called Little River Canyon located about 20 minutes from where I grew up in Northeast Alabama.

It was in Little River Canyon where I developed my love for nature, for hiking. That's where I became convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that swimming in natural water is far better than swimming in chlorine filled swimming pools. Little River is the place I've often visited when I have something weighing deeply on my mind and I need to find clarity or peace. It's the place where I've had some of the most important conversations of my life. And, maybe, more than anything, it is the place that I have gone to when I need to remember that God is good.

Little River Canyon is the deepest canyon in the eastern U.S. and it was formed by the river flowing through this land, slowly cutting the canyon millimeter by millimeter for billions of years, creating one of the most awe-inspiring landscapes anywhere.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit as well as mark the birthday of the Christian church. Pentecost was a Jewish festival and there were crowds in Jerusalem from all over the world, representing a multitude of cultures and languages. And it's then that the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and they leave the safety of the room where they were still hiding behind locked doors to go out into the streets and proclaim that the gospel is for all peoples.

The role of language is striking in this story. The crowds are able to hear the gospel in their own native language.

There are two places in the Bible where different languages are an important theme. The first is in Genesis, the story of the tower of Babel where human language is confused and as a result human division occurs. Humans no longer have one language and, therefore, are no longer one people. Pentecost is the other story where language is a major theme. But unlike, pre-Tower of Babel, the people don't go back to one language, but rather they become united as one people with diverse languages, with diverse cultures. The coming of the Holy Spirit brings the whole world together – not because we have all become the same, but because we all belong to God. As the writer of Acts tells us, "Each one heard the gospel proclaimed in their own native tongue." The world was changed – no longer was Christianity a tribal religion. It was for all peoples of every place. The Holy Spirit cannot be contained by any singular culture, language, or location but is manifest itself in a multitude of beautiful and mysterious ways.

And because of that, the coming of the Holy Spirit unites us...or maybe it's more accurate to say that the Holy Spirit teaches us that we have always been united and that means that we all must be concerned not only with the things that affect us directly, but recognize that our neighbor's concerns are also our concerns. The Holy Spirit birthed not just a church but a movement where the disciples learned to see all the people of the world as their siblings – Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. In short, the coming of the Holy Spirit birthed the community whose purpose is to live out the reality that each and every one of us is a child of God and that Jesus' love, grace, and salvation is available for all...no exceptions.

And yet, that's a hard lesson for humans to learn. All it takes is a quick glance at the state of the world to know that we are not united as one, that we do not concern ourselves with our neighbors concerns. And that's not just true about the modern world. Even the disciples, the people who first received the Holy Spirit, the people who were amazed as the words coming out of their mouths were understandable to people who spoke different languages, people from different lands – even they didn't get the message the first go around. After the coming of the Holy Spirit, after this amazing display of diversity and tongues, the disciples still saw the world through the lens of tribes – the Church is for Jewish people and if Gentiles want to join, they have to adopt our culture, our way of doing things.

But thank God the Holy Spirit didn't just come upon the disciples one time during Pentecost – but it kept coming to them, kept working on them, kept calling them to see the world and all people as neighbor. In fact, the whole reason for Paul arguing that Gentiles must be welcomed into the Church without becoming circumcised, without adopting Jewish dietary laws is because he saw the Holy Spirit come upon them. The first proponents of women preaching argued that no one man or woman could preach like they had heard women speak if it weren't the Spirit speaking through them. Time and again, the Holy Spirit gets a hold of the Church and the people in it and every single time the Church has to learn the lesson of Pentecost – that all means all. We are united not because we are the same, but we are united because we all, in their particularity, belong to God.

You see the Holy Spirit is not like a volcano erupting where a one-time event alters everything around it. Rather the Holy Spirit is a lot more like the river that formed Little River Canyon over billions of years, that river that keeps flowing, year after year after year until it creates a masterpiece...until it empowers us to build the world God dreams of – a world where we learn to see each other for who we truly are – children of God created in love, by love, and for love.

But seeing each other as Image of God is only part of the work of the Holy Spirit --- the Holy Spirit also calls us to the work of justice. If the work of the Spirit is to learn to see all people as God's people, all people as my siblings, then that means whenever any human being is mistreated or whenever any group is disenfranchised, discriminated against, or oppressed, I can't just ignore it because it's not my group or my people. If we are truly a Spirit filled people, then we can never say, "Well, that's their problem," or "Well, that doesn't affect me or my family." The moment we say that, the moment we think that, we are denying the work of the Holy Spirit in and among us.

The prophet Amos also uses the imagery of a river when he cries out, "But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

I'm so struck by the imagery – justice should roll like waters.

Jim Douglas story – peace vigils, anti death penalty work

I've been at it for a year and nothing has happened

I've been at it for 50 years, but we'll get there...we'll get there

No discouragement –

I think justice work, Holy Spirit work changes the way we view time. So often, I think we would like for justice work to be a big event – you know we think of historic moments like the March on Washington and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech or the landmark ruling of Oberfell when the Supreme Court ruled that same sex couples have just as much right to marry as any of us. But the thing we have to remember is that those historic moments, while amazing, did not just come from nowhere – they were birthed out of generations of people choosing to work, and bleed, and die for justice.

The March on Washington happened because 150 years before abolitionists risked everything to end slavery, because freedom riders suffered bombings and beatings for civil rights, because Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin said I'm not giving up my seat.

Oberfell happened because trans people and gay people at Stonewall said we won't take it no more. It happened because brave clergy were willing to give up their careers for the sake of justice. It happened because countless people said you can't stop love...that love equals love equals love equals love no matter what.

You see, the work of the Holy Spirit is never just about a one time moment or experience, but it's about the countless hours of building relationships, of having one on one conversations, of fighting against systems of oppression and seemingly failing and getting back up and fighting some more, it's about trusting in Dr. King's words that the "arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice." It's about learning the lesson of the river that flows day after day seemingly not having any impact, but over time, even billions of years, patiently carving out a masterpiece. You've heard me say over and over again and you'll hear me say more that God loves each and every one of us just as we are. But the coming of the Holy Spirit also shows us that while God loves us just as we are, God is also continueing to work on each of us, continueing to work on the world around us. God loves us as we are but God is not through working on us. Today on Pentecost, may we remember that the Holy Spirit never gives up on us and never gives up on the world. The Holy Spirit is relentless as it comes to us again and again and again to say, "All" means all. Love all. Do justice for all. Be a Pentecost people.

Amen.