

Trinity United Methodist Church
May 31, 2020—Pentecost Sunday
“Recalculating—Part 4”
Pastor Dan Elmore

Welcome and Prayer

Good morning, friends, on this Pentecost Sunday morning. I was just checking myself in the camera and realized I should have been wearing red. That is the traditional color of Pentecost Sunday. But nonetheless, we still celebrate Pentecost together as we worship in our homes and from wherever we’re participating in our worship together today. We’re glad that you’ve joined us, and we pray that this worship service will be meaningful to you, to empower you especially in these days that we face together.

Please join me in prayer. God, what a joy it is to gather together virtually yet again. We miss each other greatly and the fellowship of church, being face to face together, but we trust that by Your spirit we continue to be Your people, that we continue to be Your church in our homes and in our spheres of influence, no matter how far they have shrunk or potentially grown during this time. Lord, Pentecost Sunday is typically a very celebratory Sunday, as it should be, when we celebrate the gift of your Holy Spirit to your people.

Lord, also, this day we come with quite heavy hearts, particularly for what is going on in our country right now. Father, first of all, we pray for George Floyd, for those who have lost their lives, those who face threats to their lives, often simply because of the color of their skin. Lord, we confess that we have many demons that we have inherited here in our country. Though we have much in our past as a country to be proud of, remind us that we also have those parts of our history that we should not be proud of, the ramifications of which we continue to live with and struggle with today. Help us to remember that it is possible to be patriotic while at the same time to question what makes us American and to question those in authority; for indeed, that might be what makes us most American.

So, Lord, we pray for justice for those who have lost their lives. And while many disagree on the ways to go about pursuing that justice, help us to listen to one another. Help us to hear the pain of the communities that think that there’s no other way to be heard or to be seen than by rioting. Help us to look beneath the surface of all of these acts, to see what lies beneath, especially the sin that so easily entangles us, especially

the sin of racism. And before we go pointing out any sin in someone else's eye, help us to follow the words of Jesus and to work to remove the plank from our own eye. And even as we might work to do so, remind us that we cannot do it alone, but that we are utterly dependent on your grace and your mercy to remove it for us.

Help us to give our sin to you, whatever it is that separates us from you and from each other, whether it be prejudice, whether it be pride, or whatever the case might be. Help us to give it to you and help us not to take it back, but to live our lives as citizens of your kingdom, trusting and following you and living in the ways of your spirit always.

We pray for the many needs of our church and our community, and of our nation and of our world. As many times in which we've lived, these seem even more perilous times. So, God, see us through. Help us to depend on you. Help us to be agents of your grace and your love, wherever we find ourselves in all of this. For these things and more, we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture: Acts 2:1-13 (NIV)

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" 13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Wow. What a week. Every time we turn on the news, things just really seem to get worse and worse sometimes, don't they? I saw a meme on Facebook. It was a person leaning over, getting a close look at something, and the caption said: "Me, checking to see what chapter of Revelation we're doing today." And for many, it seems pretty doggone bad. We are living in a time of increasing chaos, and my gut tells me we've yet to see the end of it.

But also, I love history. I love being a student of history. Some of y'all are probably thinking, *yeah, duh, we knew that*, because so much of my preaching and especially teaching is filled with so much history. But one of the reasons why I love history is, the more that you study history, the more that you see the same patterns that repeat themselves over and over and over. You know, people will get so skittish about a particular stock market crash, and if you study history, you see that those things go in patterns of ebbs and flows and rising and falling. You see the fall of one nation or kingdom in the course of history and the rise of another, and these patterns just continue to repeat themselves.

I was talking with a friend, who said that the grandest pattern of all is this pattern, really, of order, then disorder, and then order again. Some might say "new order," and that's so politically laden that it freaks us out from time to time. But we have this pattern of order and disorder and order all throughout human history. We read it in the Bible over and over. You might say that really the Bible started with disorder, when in the beginning God hovered over the surface of the deep. It was a time of disorder, but God brought order out of that. Creation. God brought order into the world. And so you might start there. You might say that we began with God with order. Our God is a God of order.

But soon enough, disorder entered into that story and the pattern shifted to a pattern of disorder when sin entered in. When the serpent tempted Adam and Eve, when they were banished from the garden and they had to live with consequences of giving in to the temptation of sin.

And so humanity lived in that pattern of wrestling with the consequences of sin until the point where God then brought order again, you could say, by bringing his people, the Israelites, out of Egypt and bringing order through the law. An ordering system by which His people could live and be God's people, the way God wanted them to be. And if they would do that, things would be a world of order again.

And so then the pattern resets itself. It's this period of order—"Yes, thank you for the law. We will obey it." But soon enough, disorder enters again. It's sin, again. And we read about that largely through the book of Judges. This pattern shrunk, you could say, in the book of Judges, where the Israelites fell away from order and obeying God, and they fell into trouble. Usually some foreign nation would start to pick on them and invade them. They would cry out to God. God would send a judge, or a deliverer--Gideon was one; Deborah was one—to rescue the Israelites, gather their forces, conquer their enemies. God would fight the battles. There would be a time of order. Soon enough they would give up on God—*we've got it from here, thank you*—and fall into disorder again. I don't know about you, but the pattern of life is in the book of Judges.

But soon enough, God brought His people out of that pattern of disorder into order again, you could say, through the kingdom, united under King David. So the kingdom of God's people enjoyed this period of relative order, where everything was as God wanted it to be, with a man after His own heart on the throne and following as God would have him follow, despite some pretty deep character flaws, even, that David had.

And so the pattern resets itself. We have this pattern of order of the kingdom into disorder after David's death and Solomon's death, into the disorder of unfaithful kings, which ultimately led to exile, when Babylon conquered Jerusalem, 586 B.C., and took most of the people back to Babylon with them. And God's people then lived in exile in various places from the Holy Land all the way up to modern-day Iraq. And as the generations went on, they dispersed even further from there.

Then the order part came again, as Babylon was conquered by the Persians and King Cyrus allowed some of the Jews to return back home to rebuild the temple. So the return from exile and the renewal of the law and all of those sorts of things that we read about in Ezra and Nehemiah and so forth.

So order-disorder-order. That pattern resets yet again with the order of return from exile and then the disorder of foreign occupation and oppression in the land of Israel, that led to the order of the time of the Messiah, or the expectations of the Messiah. God's Anointed One that would order everything rightly as God wanted them, once and for all.

But really, as you look through scripture, you see these sort of subplots of order-disorder-order, but you see a grander narrative as well. It's one of the benefits of reading the Bible through from cover to cover, especially to read it rather quickly. If you haven't ever tried reading the Bible in 90 days, I would recommend that. It's impossible to get lost in the weeds when you're reading that fast. But what it does is, it gives you a better sense of the bigger picture of the narrative of scripture. And that grander picture is that we begin with order. With the Garden of Eden with humanity as one. That was

God's intention. That was God's intention for us to live that way forever. Then, of course, disorder of sin entered the picture, and you might say that sin became especially manifest in those early chapters of Genesis in an account of the Tower of Babel. Basically, humanity looked at each other and said, "Who's this God, anyway, and who does he think he is? We've got the know-how. We've got the power within ourselves. Let's build a tower to reach God, because then we can be like God ourselves. We can make ourselves God," essentially, is what they said. God, of course, sees their intentions, sees their plans, sees the tower being built. And God then says, "this is not good that they should do this." So God scatters them. That is the particular creation story that gives rise to how we wound up in different nations with different tongues, with different colors of skin, with different cultures, etc.

And humanity was divided at that point, particularly around language. And the question is, when will this disorder and this disharmony be resolved? Here's where I get to our text for today. Enter into Pentecost. It was 50 days after Jesus had risen on Easter. He had spent the time teaching his disciples some more, making resurrection appearances. And shortly before Pentecost, Jesus ascended into heaven. He gave instructions to the disciples to stay in Jerusalem, to wait there until the Holy Spirit came, and then they would be witnesses of the kingdom in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So in Acts chapter 2, from which I read today, is the familiar passage that we read every Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the gift of God, the Holy Spirit, coming upon His people. Oftentimes we focus on various aspects of this Pentecost story, and for today I want you to hear again this concern about language. In verse 7 and following: They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee. And yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" They stood there amazed and perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other. (NLT)

Now, to be clear, the apostles were speaking in Aramaic. But all these other people that were gathered there heard the proclamation of the gospel in their own languages.

I've told the story before—you might remember it—of a colleague of mine who went to Russia on a trip. While preaching there in Russia he had an interpreter who was interpreting while he was speaking and preaching. And he likes to sing sometimes while he preaches, in the middle of his sermons, and so he sang the Spirit Song. It's in our

hymnal. *Oh, let the Son of God enfold you / with His Spirit and His love /...* So he sang that song, and after the song was over, the interpreter got ready to simply interpret the words that he just sang. All the Russian people gathered there stopped the interpreter and said, “Why are you doing that? He just sang that song in perfect Russian.” Now, he and the interpreter knew that he had just sung it in English, but through the Spirit, they heard it in Russian. The Holy Spirit is still very much alive and active today.

So I got a little bit ahead of myself there, because how was this possible? Even Kenny’s story happened before the days of Google Translate. There was no Duolingo, the app which teaches you a foreign language very quickly, supposedly. They didn’t study up super fast. It was simply the Holy Spirit. God, the Holy Spirit.

And through the remainder of Acts—Acts is traditionally named as Acts of the Apostles; it should be named Acts of the Holy Spirit, not of the apostles, because it’s all about how the Holy Spirit brought people of different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, beliefs, nationalities, gender, and more—how the Holy Spirit brought all these different people back together. People that had been separated by all these different categories since the time of the Tower of Babel. God brought them back together in His time and in His power, by the power of His Holy Spirit. And that’s what the Holy Spirit really does. That’s kingdom living and kingdom bringing, the kingdom of God. It’s all centered around the kingdom, around the kingship of Jesus Christ.

Now, as we study history, in every age it seems like the differences among different groups of people are highlighted just in different ways in every single age. And the time in which we live is no different. The news, especially this past week, and really continually—it’s just being magnified in this past week—highlights just how different we are from each other. Politically, religiously, spiritually, physically, racially, and otherwise. And though many of us long to go back to some time when “we all just got along”—friends, read your history. There really has been no golden age in which we all just “got along.” Someone was still on top and someone else was still on the bottom. And as long as humans remain in charge, that will continue to be the case.

So what are we to do? Are we to just accept it? Plenty of people do. Both those who benefit from it, and those who don’t but are too tired to care any more. What are we to do? And what, especially, are we to do as followers of Jesus? As those gifted with the Holy Spirit? I think it’s clear: We are to work for the kingdom. The kingdom of God, not any earthly kingdom or government. We are to work for unity.

But friends, it’s not a false unity that we’re to work for, where we somehow eliminate our differences and say, “well, yeah, we’re unified as long as we all think alike or we all act alike.” Friends, that’s not unity, that’s a cult. And sometimes that cult is not

always religious. In fact, you might say one of our biggest problems we suffer from today is the cult of politics, of political party.

It's not unity, either, for unity's sake; where we turn a blind eye to our differences. The whole "agree to disagree" sort of thing. To claim that we don't see color in another person's skin. That's false unity, also.

We're to work for the type of unity that says that though we may be different, we hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men, or people, are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We're to work for that unity that says that though we may be different, we are all made in the image of God. As the song goes that many of us were taught as children growing up in church: *Red and yellow, black and white / They are precious in His sight*. Unity that says that though we may be different, we are saved by One Name and One Name only, and that name is *not* Trump *nor* Biden. *Not* Obama *or* Bush. That One Name is Jesus, before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. We're to work for that unity that says that though we may be different, we share in the dream of Brother Martin, where children and adults of all colors will be able to join hands. Where every valley will be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and *all flesh* shall see it together.

Unity that says though we may be different, we are citizens not of America first or any nation first, but as those who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we are citizens of heaven first. Citizens of the kingdom of God first. And we pledge to do our best to live accordingly, and we humbly confess *quickly* when we get it wrong.

This is the last sermon in the series of *Recalculating*. We've been talking about what it means to "recalculate." This pandemic has been forcing us to recalculate in truly an untold number of ways, and I would say in ways we haven't even seen yet. If anything, it should be making us recalculate in our minds and spirits that we are not islands unto ourselves, but we are interconnected as one great human family. Each one made in the image of our one great God, who gives us His Spirit to draw us back together and back to God, as only the Holy Spirit can do.

Friends, we may have thought that we lived in a world of order, but I hope it's clear we have been thrown into disorder, and likely will be for some time to come. We all long to go back to what was. I know I do. But there's only one way out of this, and that's *forward*. And in doing so, to do whatever recalculating we need to do not just to survive this, but to *thrive*, as God would have us to do.

And so *thanks be to God* that we are not left to our own devices. I think we're seeing the results of that, when we're left to our own devices, when we choose our own devices. Friends, instead, we are given guidance and power and ability and agency by God of the Holy Spirit, who we celebrate this Pentecost Sunday. To live into the future that only God knows, but to live into that future that God holds, and to live into that future which God invites us all.

In closing, I'll share with you something that I was convicted of just this morning. If you use a smartphone, an iPhone or Android, iPhones have a Screen Time feature, I think it's called, where it'll even send you a weekly report, if you want it to, of how much screen time you spend on your phone. And it'll even break it down by app for you. So if you don't have that feature, if you don't currently use that feature, Google it. Look it up. Screen Time; it's called something different on Android, I believe, but it's there. It's a similar feature. Look to see how much time, especially in these stay-at-home times, you've been spending on your phone. Scrolling through, probably, social media endlessly. Maybe you haven't been spending so much time on your phone; figure out how much time you've been spending watching TV. How many hours did it take to binge-watch the whole, what, six episodes or so of *Tiger King* or *Ozark* or whatever kind of shows I'm hearing y'all talk about? (I watched *Tiger King*. Complete train wreck, and it's not safe for families, either.)

But how much time are we spending on stuff like that? And then how much time are we spending in prayer and reading scripture? I've seen many friends post on Facebook here lately that they're taking time off Facebook because it's gotten too "political." Okay, fine. But how much time are we spending on stuff like that versus time talking with God and listening to God and reading scripture? Figure it out. Write it on a piece of paper. Compare it.

And then my challenge to myself and the challenge I extend to you, especially during these crazy times in which we live: Work to spend *at least* as much time as you're spending in front of a screen--whether it be a device, a TV or whatever--praying and reading scripture. And you might go, "Oh, gosh! I don't have time to spend that much time in prayer and reading scripture!" Let that convict you, as it does me. You know how you can fix that? *Turn off the phone*. Put it aside. Cut back on the screen time. On the social media time. On the echo chamber time which we spend watching our favorite talking head on Fox News or CNN or whatever. Cut back on that, and spend more time in the Word and with God. It's not only the best way to get through this; I submit to you that it's maybe the *only* way to get through this. Would you join me?

I also wanted to note that we will be having our first "dress rehearsal" service, you might call it; in-person worship this week. That is on a limited number, so that is limited to the team of individuals who are being trained. We'll get that list out to you of

who those persons are so that you might be in prayer for us as we take a step out, living into the requirements set forth by our Bishop and our Conference. But also doing our best to make sure that we return to in-person worship in ways that are safe and that help to keep everybody well, so that especially those most at risk amongst us would not potentially be affected by this virus.

It's a complicated, crazy world in which we live, now more than ever. I don't know about you, but I've never been more thankful for the gift of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our Advocate, our Comforter. God, who leads us into all truth, who reminds us of all that Jesus said and who will comfort us and guide us every step of the way forward.

Thanks be to God. Amen.