

“All Together In One Place”
Acts 2:1-16; Genesis 11:1-9

A few weeks ago I had to make a final decision of whether or not to schedule a Session retreat for 2019. For about thirty years we have taken the Session, the group of elders who is our ruling body, for a Friday night and Saturday morning to the Presbyterian Conference Center in Montreat for an annual get together. Even though the schedule from supper on Friday to lunch on Saturday has remained the same, we have varied our programming. Sometimes we bring in speakers, while at other times the staff has led the retreat, or we have studied a long range plan or a building committee report.

Now, one of my hesitations in scheduling the retreat is that all the planning can be a real pain. I have to find a speaker, and of course, we have to pay someone to come in and make the presentations. Plus, because of Montreat's scheduling, only certain weekends are available. And for some reason, it often chooses to snow on our weekend. We hit a stretch where I cancelled three straight years because of snow. And, one year I cancelled out while looking out my study here in Greenville onto a beautiful sunny day, but a snow storm was headed straight for the mountains. And, even when the weather is good, on that Friday as I face the prospect of driving up to Montreat and back on Saturday, and then preach on Sunday, I ask myself, whose idea was this? And I know the elders are thinking exactly the same thing.

And yet, every single year, whatever my reservations, I decide to plan for the staff and Session to once more make the trek to Montreat, or what some refer to as “Presbyterian Heaven.” Why? Because regardless of the snow, or Friday after work drive, or the fact we always seem to go during the ACC basketball tournament, there is something special about all of us getting together in one place. Though we only spend eighteen hours at Montreat, those few moments enable people to get to know each other a little better, discover something about the family, job, and faith of that person who sits beside them at Session meetings.

I have always been amazed to watch the consensus and support that coalesces around long range and building committee reports. When we are all together, somehow, someway, the Spirit of God moves within us and around us. I believe the vision, camaraderie, and inspiration that has characterized this church's Sessional leadership has grown out of our relationships with one another, much of it fostered at Session retreats. It is easier to find common ground with people you know and about whom you care.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”

Most of the time when we think about Pentecost, often called the birthday of the Church, we concentrate on the spectacular elements. What did the tongues of fire look like? Were the strange tongues glossolalia, what we call speaking in tongues, or were they uttering different languages? And, how did those people go from frightened, timid disciples to confident proclaimers of the Christian faith?

All of these are worthy questions, and valuable for study. But what we often overlook is the one key element that made all of it possible. Verse one: "...they were all together in one place."

Now, that is not as simple as it sounds. First of all, Jesus was crucified as a criminal, a revolutionary. So, his followers would be branded with the same designation, and crime. Logic would demand that they split up, hide separately so as to escape capture.

Secondly, how could you be certain of these who were hiding with you? Were there others like Judas? And, what about somebody like Peter? If the going got tough, if he was captured, would he talk, reveal their names, act as he did the night he denied Jesus three times?

There is some dispute as to whether present in that area were the twelve apostles or 120 of Jesus' followers. I think most scholars probably believe that 120 were in some way gathered together. Which means that is a substantial number of people to trust with your life. And yet, verse one clearly notes they had intentionally gathered "all together in one place."

You may have heard about the Sunday a pastor told his congregation that the church needed more money and asked people to consider giving a little extra in the collection plate. He said that whoever gave the most would be able to pick out three hymns. After the offering plates were passed, the pastor glanced down and noticed that someone had placed a \$10,000 check in the offering. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he'd like to personally thank the individual who placed the money in the plate.

A very quiet, elderly, saintly lady all the way in the back shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front. Slowly she made her way to the pastor. He told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much and in thanks, asked her to pick out her three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation, pointed to the three most handsome men in the building and said, "I'll take him and him and him."

Pentecost or today, in any church gathering, there are always those whose interpretation of things may not be as trustworthy as you think they should be.

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."

It is not all that easy to all get together in one place. With 120 disciples, there would have been 120 opinions. Differences of belief as to when Jesus would return, what the Holy Spirit would or would not do and how they should prepare for it; whether the Jewish law still applied to them; whether they should still eat kosher; whether women should now be allowed in the group, even though Jesus first appeared to women after his resurrection. And who would be in charge now that Jesus was gone. Were those who were pushing Peter as the leader crazy or just stupid? If anyone had screwed up, wasn't it the big talking and cowardly acting Peter?

And what about all those people milling around out there who were wanting to know about Jesus? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, Arabs. Would they allow these immigrants to horn in on their group? Did you get to be a

part by just showing up? Hadn't some of us paid a price to walk with Jesus? Shouldn't these earn their position?

Plus, just to be honest, when we were following Jesus, I was the one who foraged for food, gave out of my savings to feed the master, and always rowed the boat when we went out fishing, while Fred just sat on his backside. If anyone gets to take the lead, shouldn't it be me?

Being all together in one place was no easier then than now. But the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion. Christianity is a communal faith. Worship remains the only indispensable act of the Christian Church. And that central element of togetherness makes it both powerful and difficult. Because when I have to tolerate, listen to, accommodate others, I can't only concentrate on myself. I must take other people into account. And often, those others don't think like me, don't act like me, may not even be particularly likeable.

And it was exactly the same way that day almost 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. Those people who gathered together in one place there in Jerusalem did not know each other any better than those of us here today. They did not like each other any better, or worse, than those of us here today. They did not agree about theological or social issues anymore, or less, than those of us here today. Yet, they were there because Jesus told them to be there. And because they were, God's Spirit powerfully worked among them.

This morning, we gather all together in one place. We are as fearful, divergent, sinful, and unsure as those 120 back then. From that first Pentecost morning right up to this day, the Church has always been not a sanctuary for saints, but a hospital for sinners. We are here because Jesus told us to gather together and because we believe God will work among us, will take our differences and make them strengths, take our diversity and use it across a broad range of ministry. What we cannot accomplish individually, we can bring to fruition when we join together. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not only symbolic of our relationship with Christ, but our commitment to be "all together in one place."

The pastor was astonished. He had just arrived at a Coptic monastery, a day's journey from Cairo. The monks were treating him as though he was the most important guest they had received since the monastery was founded in the 12th century. They served him a fine meal, showed him to a comfortable room, brought him freshly cut flowers, and then introduced him to the abbot. "Wow!" he said, "You really know how to treat a visitor here."

Father Jeremiah replied, "We always treat guests as though they were angels — just to be safe."

This morning, as we gather "all together in one place," let us treat one another as angels — just to be safe.

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June 3, 2018