

What it Means to Be One
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This week, when I was reading the Pentecost story, for the first time I saw a direct connection between Pentecost and the motto of the United States, determined by our founders in 1782, as E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one.

With that motto, E Pluribus Unum, the founders cast a vision of people who choose to live together, not despite our differences, but in celebration of and respect for our differences. It is a vision of a place where people's worth isn't determined by their birth into nobility or a ruling class, but instead a place where the inherent worth of every person is recognized, regardless of who their parents are, how much money they have, what religion they profess, or where their families came from. It is a vision about people being able to have certain freedoms, like freedom of speech and religion, which on this Memorial Day weekend we remember just how many, too many, men and women gave their lives for that shared vision though they came from as many different backgrounds as one can imagine.

And it's that vision where I see a real similarity to what happened on Pentecost. On that day, over 2000 years ago, the author makes a point of listing all those countries where the people were from. He could have just said "people from all over," but he takes the time to list them so that the reader must slow down and really take in just how diverse this group is. It's basically a list of people from everywhere in the world that people would have had contact with at the time. They have all come to Jerusalem for a Jewish holiday, so they are primarily Jews, but that is where the similarities end. These people are from different nations. They speak different languages, eat different foods, and live in very different cultures. There are lots of opportunities for misunderstanding and it's into this diverse community the Holy Spirit enters with the mission of giving all of them a shared vision.

Part of the vision is in the giving of it itself because, notably, the Spirit didn't make everyone there suddenly able to speak and understand a single language. No, they were each understood, still speaking their own language. The Spirit invited everyone present into this new shared vision but did so by allowing them to come as themselves. Which then became the foundation and framework of the church – that we would come together as many and leave as one. Not as people who have conformed or surrendered our distinctiveness, but as people inspired by the same

vision who will carry out that vision in our own unique ways, with our own unique gifts, and our own particular languages. Out of many, one.

Now, of course, in our faith and in our country, we live this vision together imperfectly at best. We have strayed far from it in some cases and sometimes it can seem like we don't even share a vision at all. Still, across so many generations, this vision persists and continues to be held out as a beacon of what we are working towards – unity amid diversity, out of many, one.

It is the harder way, to be sure. Even the smallest example can show how much harder it is. Take for example our recent sanctuary renovation. All these changes are the result of 3 years and 3 different taskforces, plus a survey and the session's deliberations. And we did change quite a bit, but not everything.

We could have just picked one person, told them they were in charge and could make all the decisions, and it surely would have been done much faster. But, the danger of that is one person has all the power and could decide to put a mural of their cat on the front wall and the rest of us would all hate it and feel like it wasn't our kind of place anymore and we'd likely start losing people who didn't want to go to the cat church.

Or you do it the way we did where a lot of people come together with their own opinions and preferences. It takes a lot of conversation and back and forth. It opens the possibility of disagreements and miscommunications. It meant Brandon had to go back to the flooring store several times for yet one more batch of tile samples. And perhaps it also means that no one person gets their first choice for everything. Instead, everyone gets some things they love and some things they like and maybe a few things they didn't care much about but were willing to compromise about. So, it's harder. But after all of that we have a church that still feels enough like home to everybody that we stay together and everyone feels like they had something to offer and that they were included and then out of many, one.

Last week, my sermon also had to do with this idea of how we are called to be "one." Jesus prayed that his disciples and all who followed him would be one. And when I went home, I saw the news about the event on the National Mall in DC that day called "One Nation Under God" and claimed to be a national "rededication" worship service. The stated goal was to "rededicate the United States as being one nation under God" for our nation's 250th anniversary."

The use of “one nation under God” in this context is aimed at a different kind of oneness than what our founders meant by E Pluribus Unum or what our faith is showing us through the revelation of the Spirit on Pentecost.

First, it is worth remembering that the phrase “one nation under God” hasn’t always been a part of our national identity. It was added to the pledge of allegiance in 1954 and on our coins in 1956 as part of a cold war campaign that was designed to distinguish the United States from communism. However, these days that phrase “one nation under God” is being taken a step further by a growing movement of Christian Nationalists who would like to declare the United States a Christian country and even to make Christianity the state religion. That’s a different interpretation of “out of many, one.” That interpretation is more about forcing people to put away their differences in order to conform to one “right” way.

While the founders and the witnesses of Pentecost were encouraged to keep their differences, the way “one nation under God” is being used by Christian Nationalists is to squash religious and cultural and linguistic pluralism into something much more exclusive – one “right” way. It is a vision of unity through the ending of diversity, or at least the dominating of diversity.

Now, I’m not saying Christians shouldn’t have a place in public life. They absolutely should. Our faith insists that we work for justice and the common good. But, when Christianity and national identity become one and the same, it is all too easy to call those who disagree “enemies of God” or “enemies of the nation.” It becomes all too easy to use religion to justify power grabs. It becomes all too easy to let the ambitions of politicians be justified by faith in a way that distorts the very teachings of our faith.

Rev. Benjamin Cremer said it this way: “Christians should be especially cautious whenever faith becomes wrapped too tightly in nationalism, political spectacle, or state power. Not because faith is unimportant. But because it is sacred. When the church becomes too closely tied to the ambitions of the state, it often loses its ability to speak truthfully against injustice altogether.”

The founding of this country was adamantly against this, which is why our constitution is full of protection against the linking of church and state.

And our faith is also against it. The Pentecost story is a story about the sending out of people who would represent Jesus in the world. And to represent Jesus in any

meaningful way has always required speaking truthfully against injustice. To represent Jesus in the world has to mean that we will tell the story of a God who cares so deeply for the outcast, the marginalized, the sinners, and those considered to be least that God was willing to come to earth and risk death to show us just how important it is to God. To represent Jesus is to tell stories of the one who constantly widened the circle with his shocking parables of “Good” Samaritans and ate with tax collectors and invited women to sit at his feet as students and loved even those who would betray him. And then, on Pentecost, we remember a God whose Spirit certainly had the power to make everyone speak just one language but chose to let people understand each other without giving up what was central to who they were. This God blew the doors wide open to include more than one man or one community and instead said: this Spirit, this vision, is for everybody, not despite who you are, but just as you are.

Peter sees what is happening and quotes the prophet Joel in a radically inclusive statement that specifies that the Spirit isn’t just for Jews or men or free people or wealthy or titled people. The Spirit is poured out on ALL flesh. Everyone is brought under the power of the Spirit. Everyone can understand. And everyone is sent out to share the good news.

So, what does that mean for us, today, Christians living in the United States in 2026? Well, it means choosing the harder way. We Presbyterians have a saying “a priesthood of all believers.” It means that we don’t operate with a hierarchy. We don’t turn our decisions over to one person. We do our best to acknowledge and respect all the different unique gifts people bring and try to find ways for people to use those gifts towards our shared vision. We do the hard work of doing everything in groups with the hope of reaching consensus, but we make a point of trying to welcome dissenting voices and different ideas. We accept that we might not always get our first choice or even our second, but we value being together over always getting our way. We keep coming back to the shared vision – the kingdom of God on earth, the example of Jesus, the inspiration of the Spirit, which all point to a vision of love of justice and peace and human flourishing. And we reject every version of Christianity that says we all must believe the same things, or speak the same language, or vote the same way, or exclude some people, or only love people just like us. And finally, we remember all the people who have clung to that vision, died for that vision, bandaged it up repeatedly and passed it to us so that we will do our absolute best to keep it going long enough to pass off to the next generation. Out of the many, one. May it be so.