

I always like it when we do these dramatic readings because it reminds me that I really have no experience like the one Jesus' disciples had at Pentecost. I don't know what it's like:

- to be out in the street preaching in a language that is not my own
- to be so filled with the Holy Spirit
- or to be so scared that I lock my self in a room

The beginning of the story we just heard makes it sound like Jesus' disciples and other followers were having a fun social gathering, that they were all just hangin' out, waiting for the Holy Spirit to arrive, but that wasn't the case.

After Jesus' ascension into heaven, his followers returned to Jerusalem and they locked themselves inside one house because they were terrified – because at that point in time Jesus' apostles and other followers were marked men and women. They feared for their lives.

The Romans were looking for them because they had consorted with Jesus and as such, they were part of a rebellion that Rome needed to thwart.

They were also wanted by the Jewish religious elite who were not happy about the disappearance of Jesus' body.

And even though the Risen Christ had appeared to his followers and promised them that after he left, he would send the Holy Spirit who would be their helper, teacher, comforter, advocate, and guide, they had no idea when the Holy Spirit would arrive. Jesus had not given them a specific time.

So they were all hold up together in a house, not really knowing what exactly they were to do. And they were terrified.

They were so afraid that the Holy Spirit had to descend upon them with force, the force of a great wind that literally drove them out into the streets. Because if the Spirit hadn't done that, Jesus' followers might have gone back to their pre-Jesus lives, blending in, hiding in plain sight.

When I think about it this way, I realize that I have no idea what Jesus' followers were feeling. You see, I've never experienced that kind of terror. I've spent my entire life as part of the dominant culture.

I grew up right here in the Hales Corners area and have lived here for most of my life. For my entire life I've been surrounded by people like me – white, middle class, heterosexual, English speaking, Christians. For 52 years, I've lived in a society that not only accepts me, but has made me the norm. So I can be myself, my complete self, everywhere I go.

I can dance and laugh with my friends. I can kiss my husband and hold his hand or walk arm in arm in public without fear of violence. I can talk with co-workers and even acquaintances about my marriage, my family life, and my faith without fear of judgment, criticism, or ridicule.

You see, I've never experienced what it's like to be locked inside a room or a house, terrified to come out because of who I am, who I love, or what I believe. And when I do come out of my house, I'm not afraid to be my whole self with the people I meet.

But there are people in our society who do know what that terror feels like. They know exactly how Jesus' followers felt. Many of them still experience that fear daily – fear of being who they are, fear of being who God has created them to be.

So they have to be cautious and selective. They have to monitor how they act, what they wear, and what they say so they fit in. They have to be selective about the details of their personal lives and who they can trust with what information, much much more so than I do and doing all of this can be exhausting.

Plus, when they do choose to be themselves in public it is often at great personal risk.

By now you may realize that I'm talking about people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, or Asexual, who often feel like they have to hide in plain sight because they are more likely than any other group of people in the U.S. to be targets of hate, ridicule, and violence.<sup>1</sup>

And very often that hate, ridicule, and violence is done by people who claim to be Christian.

Too many people who are LGBTQIA have spent most or all of their lives being told that God does not love them, completely, just as they are and they've been told this in church.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html?_r=0)

That's why this art project is important to me.

It's called "Colors of Love" and the 3 panels of artwork you see here today are a collage of about 70 of the 250 total pieces of individual artwork that were made at Milwaukee Pridefest last year.

Each piece was created by people who visited and volunteered at our UCC Open and Affirming booth as a witness to God's love for each and every one of us.

We call it a collaborative art project because it was a way for our UCC volunteers to share God's love with people visiting our booth, to talk with them about that love and how it's lived in the UCC. In turn, the project gave visitors the opportunity to share their ideas about God's love and love in general with all of us, not just the volunteers at our Pridefest booth.

So I hope that you will come up and look at the artwork more closely after worship so that you can see what people have drawn and written. And when you do, I want you to take note of one thing in particular, that no two pieces are exactly the same.

People were encouraged to draw a heart, decorate it, and even add words. Yet, even though there are some similarities amongst the pieces, the colors are different, the styles are different, the designs are different, and the words are different. They are not the same and that's exactly the point.

The pieces are not exactly the same because we are not exactly the same. We are all human beings, so we are similar to each other in many ways, and yet we are all different physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually.

Unfortunately though, many of us have been taught not to see diversity or acknowledge differences but to instead always focus on the ways we are the same. Yet doing that means that we don't see people for who they are. Plus when we do that, we do something that we don't do with other species or other human traits.

- we notice and comment on eye and hair color
- flowers – roses are not marigolds
- trees – oak trees are not pine trees

So often when someone who is not like us, someone who is not white or not heterosexual, experiences life, or society, or the world differently than we do, we say things like, “underneath, we are all the same, we all have souls, we all have feelings, we all have skeletons, we all bleed the same.”

And that's true but only to a certain extent.

- yes, we all bleed the same EXCEPT that my blood is O+, which means that if I need blood, only O+ and O- blood is compatible with mine
- another example is when a woman and her fetus have incompatible blood types, the woman's body will produce an autoimmune response that attacks the fetus' blood cells as if they were a bacteria or virus<sup>2</sup>
- when it comes to bacterial infections, the same antibiotic may not work on the same infection in two different people
- when it comes to bones, the same break may not heal the same way in two different people
- that's because although we have similar biology, it is not exactly the same

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cerebralpalsy.org/about-cerebral-palsy/risk-factors/blood-incompatibility>

The same is true for our feelings

- 2 people can experience the exact same thing and each one react differently and have different feelings about it
- that's what makes empathy so hard – it's that I really don't know how you feel even though I had something similar happen to me one time

And I think that it's even possible for our souls to be different

- have you ever met someone who you thought had a really old soul? is that different than a regular or young soul?
- have you ever seen a soul? if not, then how do we know that they are all the same?

So we are similar but we are not the same, except in one thing – God loves each of us as we are in every moment.

So like flowers or trees, human diversity is by design. God made us similar, but not the same, different skin colors, different hair colors, different blood types, different bone structures, different gender identities, different sexual preferences, different ways of experiencing and reacting to the world, and different languages.

God does not want us all to be the same, to be uniform, unvaried, and indistinguishable. God does not want us to not see or diminish our differences and diversity for the sake of unity.

In today's story when the Holy Spirit drove Jesus' followers out into the street, the people listening to them did not suddenly learn to speak the disciple's language.

Instead, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak all of the different languages of the people around them. Their diversity was valued and preserved, not wiped away.

We are created differently on purpose so that we can experience and spread God's love in the world in different ways and no one among us should feel afraid to be who they are, who God created them to be. No one should be terrified to come out of their locked room or to speak the truth about who they are and who they love.

As Christians, we are called, through our words and our actions to let people know that they are loved completely by God, just as they are. And doing that is not always comfortable. So sometimes our discomfort and our dis-ease locks us in our homes, or our communities, or our churches, locks us into wanting everyone to be the same.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit is still with us, guiding, helping, teaching, and comforting us – driving us out and giving us words to speak when we feel like we have nothing good to say – no good news to share.

So today let's remember and celebrate (be reminded by our Communion bread) that God's Holy Spirit is with us, reminding us that each of us is loved fully, just as we are. Amen.