

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington June 22, 2008

*In the busyness of this day  
Grant us a stillness of seeing, O God.  
In the conflicting voices of our hearts  
Grant us a calmness of hearing.  
Ground us in your peace.  
Amen.  
(Celtic Benediction, J. Philip Newell)*

We have been celebrating Pentecost Sunday for seven weeks. “Pentecost” is really only one Sunday, May 11 this year, when we celebrate the birthday of the church.

Finally, next Sunday, we will give in and move on to the season of Ordinary Time. But these past seven weeks have been anything but an “ordinary” time in our life together. In these past weeks, we have marked, celebrated, and grieved many changes in our life together.

We marked Don’s last Sunday with us and had a big party to celebrate Don’s thirteen year ministry here and his retirement. We celebrated our high school graduates and other graduates. We celebrated our youth who led us in worship last Sunday. Today, we celebrate the gifts of our chancel choir, ushers, teachers, and seminarians.

During these past seven weeks we had important people in our lives die. A number of our members lost parents and grandparents and close friends. Yesterday, many of us were here to celebrate the life of Winnie Coleman.

On this final “Pentecost” Sunday of these extraordinary seven weeks I have been wondering:  
How do we hold it all together – the depth and breadth of all that we have been through?

Yesterday at Winnie’s memorial service we were reminded of the breadth and depth of human life - the joy and sorrow, promise and pain that all of our lives contain.

When we heard the choir sing that beautiful anthem, it sounded like one voice. But Heidi points out that the music we hear today actually has up to eight distinct parts.

How do we bring together the fullness of our life as church and make it sing as one community together?

How do we bring together the scattered parts of our individual lives and make a life that sings whole and true?

So often we end up not holding all the parts of our lives together but dividing up the separate parts of our lives.

We divide our lives between the things we like – and things we don't like.

When there is something good and joyful in our life, we want to hold it forever and never let go.

When there is something bad or sad, we want to stop feeling that way and run away from it as quickly as we can.

And so we battle with ourselves all the time – clinging to and losing joy; fighting off and fearing sadness and pain.

It is called “samsara” in Buddhism - thinking that we can find some lasting pleasure, and avoid pain. It leads to a hopeless cycle that goes round and round endlessly and causes us to suffer greatly.

It is what the psalmist in Psalm 86 prays for - to have a big enough heart to hold the “all” of life, an “undivided heart” (Psalm 86:11). To be able to “give thanks to God with my whole heart”. (Psalm 86:12)

What does it mean to live in the way of the undivided heart?

I heard a story the other day:

A Moslem king was confused, and sought advice from the wisest people in his kingdom.

The king said, “I do not know why but I want a ring, one that will enable me to calm my state of tension. I must have such a ring. And this ring must be one which, when I am unhappy, will make me joyful. At the same time, if I am happy and look upon it, I must be made sad”.

The wise women and men consulted one another. They threw themselves into deep thought. Finally, they came to a decision as to the wording to inscribe on the ring.

They presented the ring to the king which said, “This, Too, Will Pass”.

Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister, comments on this story:

“Happiness comes when clinging goes...What I have now, I will someday not have. What is bothering me now will end, and I will not be bothered by it in the future. So, if I can hold my world, all of it – good and bad, exciting and terrifying, exhilarating and tragic – with open hands, nothing will ever be able to destroy me.

There is no amount of pain, no depth of pain, no disturbance or joy or suffering, that can possibly last forever. To be happy we must come to understand that.

“This, too, will pass.”

(Joan Chittister, from Welcome to the Wisdom of the World and its Meaning for You)

Happiness is the ability to live every day, every phase, every stage of life, in the awareness that it will not be ours forever – and that it is just as it should be if we are to grow and live, live and grow

We cling to the passing things of life. We all do.

But it is when we hold it all together – the joy and the sorrow, the promise and the pain - that something deeper and truer is born.

The psalmist calls it the “strength of God”.

“Turn to me and be gracious to me;

Give your strength to your servant.” (Psalm 86:16)

And it is that, more than anything that we need. In times of great change and many emotions we need to be grounded in that strength of God. This thing beyond words – that is beneath us and in us – this very strength of God holding it all.

For me it is the power of the church. It is that thing that happens here that we feel and touch sometimes that has no name. It is what we find in all of us coming here together.

We know what it is like be with others if there is only despair – we are lost and confused. We know what it is like to be with others if there is only room for joy – it can leave no room for brokenness.

The church was born through bringing together the joy and sorrow, the promise and the pain. The church was created out of Jesus’ crucifixion and the resurrection – it couldn’t have been created without both parts.

To make a rich song as a congregation it takes each and every one of us here. What has happened here and what will happen here today could not have happened if each and every one of us were not here.

This is a “Thanks Day” as Catherine shared.

So let us give thanks to God for the gift of each other and all the ways that we come today.

And through the fullness of the “all” of life that we bring together in this place, may we all touch and be filled with the strength of God.

Amen.