

For the people of St. Philip's
The Day of Pentecost
May 27, 2007 (Year C)
Maria Hoecker, preacher
1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Hail Thee Festival Day, blessed day that art hallowed forever,

Festivals. As in red shoes. Today marks a major festival for our church, the feast of Pentecost. "The day" we sing, "when the holy ghost showne in the world with God's Grace." That's a pretty big deal, but I'll get to that, in a minute.

Festivals. As in White Squirrels. Have you been downtown this weekend?

We wandered downtown yesterday, taking in the sights, and through the power of technology we were able to include our loved ones from Kansas in our adventures. The kids and I talked to my mom as we stood on the sidelines of the squirrel box derby time trials on Courthouse Hill. We talked to my dad as we stood near the stage where a marache band was playing. He could hear the band too as we talked of the weather and other things.

Around the corner from the stage there was an attraction that the kids were literally stuck on, a sort of a Velcro inflatable wall that beckoned to those willing to don child-sized Velcro suits. The beauty of this attraction was that you could bounce against the wall and stick to it. I asked a friend to take a picture of the comical scene with her phone so that I could send a picture of those sticky kids to my dad. Cell phones are amazing.

I want you to think for a moment about the technique used to send that photograph across the country. The picture, the digital image, is composed of a million pinpricks of light – called 'pixels' – that are arranged in a pattern. That particular pattern is sent out by a tiny hand-held phone and then somewhere these pinpricks of light are recomposed on a screen or printed out, and Dad has his picture, in seconds.

This is amazing technology, but the technique itself is not new. It was invented by the French painter, Georges Seurat, who spent two years painting his masterpiece *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. It took him two years, because instead of mixing oil colors on a palette, and laying the blended colors as he saw them on the canvas with the stroke of a brush, he used a technique that became known as Pointillism. Over the course of two years he dabbed tiny dots of primary colors on the canvas so that the eye and brain of the beholder would mix them. From those dots emerged richly nuanced colors that were wonderfully shaded. The finished painting was at the time, quite novel. When the observers stood close to the painting, all they could see was a jumble of multi-colored dots of paint, but when they stepped back and took a long view, a detailed landscape emerged. The painting is quite large. You have to stand back to take it all in. (Stancliffe)

Seurat's obsession with color and light lives on, partly at least through Stephen Sondheim's musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. His painting technique has been developed to provide something which is now a basic part of our everyday experience.

Pointillism takes us to Pentecost. It helps us see a puzzling picture in the New Testament. The question: how is it that each of us is supposedly made 'in the image and likeness of God', and yet we are all so different? As Paul says: "all the members of the body, though many; are one body,so it is with Christ"

To this we ask a pointed question. How do we find balance in this world between our unity and our diversity? We are said to be of one mind in Christ, yet we live in our own worlds, cultures and races with a strong sense of our own individuality.

In the Old Testament, so the story goes, the confusion of many languages halted the building of a tower that would reach to heaven. That was due to God's intervention. Sensing that human unity might challenge God's supremacy, the Almighty confuses their language, and the project grinds to a halt leaving the Tower of Babel an unfinished monument to human overreaching.

In the New Testament, as the reading from Acts 2 reminds us, exactly the same phenomenon occurs. But now this babble does not divide, it unifies. The spirit of God fires us with a common vision, a common message and a common task. Through the fullness of time a picture emerges whole and alive from the dots of the pointillist's brush, or from those electronic pixels.

It's difficult for us to get a sense of the whole picture. When we feel challenged, if our vision is not shared, then we tend to withdraw; to paint our world in a series of flat, monochrome colors that allow no place for human individuality. Change is resisted. In religious terms, this is what leads to dangerous and exclusive fundamentalism.

The only thing we know for sure about this world is that it is – like us – in a constant process of change. The dots on the screen, are always – ever so slightly – shifting. As part of the picture, we ourselves are continually growing, changing and developing. Gradually, as we learn more, we learn to trust more, and in trusting more, we learn to be taken out of monochromatic ourselves, and transformed fully into God's own marvelously nuanced masterpiece of creation. It takes a long-view to see the whole picture as it is continually being created.

It is that continual process of change and growth that we are celebrating here this morning. That is what the process of Eucharistic worship does for us, week by week, as we experience the dots, pinpricks of our individual lives that the week has dulled and dispersed,. We are re-formed and reinvigorated as we are continually remade in God's image and likeness in this sacrament of the breaking of the bread.

Where can we find unity in our diversity? This is the birthday of the Church. But there is much grumbling as we cut into the cake. How can we resist the temptation to focus on the dots? How might we step back and take the long-view of a work in progress?

It is such a seductive temptation for us to believe that current controversies within the church must be voted upon, within some sort of arbitrary arbitrated timeline. Yet, any thoughtful student of history will tell you that controversies within the church take generations to discern and decide. It is after all *God's will* that ultimately prevails, just as the Spirit chooses.

Unlike the instant messaging of our cell phones, a recognizable picture of God's will can only emerge in God's time. We pray and trust that the Holy Spirit of God is at work in the building up our tiny, local patterns of light. The Holy Spirit brings into focus the desires and longings of individual Christian men and women – each with their own distinctive color – and the Holy Spirit sends us a snapshot in which the love of God can be known, enjoyed and shared.

This is the vision of Pentecost. We try to put words to it and yet we know that we can not grasp the whole story. It's a work in progress. It's an unfinished canvas-- it's a tapestry in the loom--- a wave of energy and light---this feast of Pentecost opens an exhibit featuring a work of art made up of the infinite variety of human gifts and experiences. We are the individual colors contained within, yet we won't be able to catch more than a

glimpse of the masterpiece, because quite simply we ARE the masterpiece.

Hail thee festival day. Thanks be to God. We are a work in progress.

(the concept of pointillism illustrating unity within diversity comes from a sermon by The Rt Revd David Stancliffe, Salisbury Cathedral)