

Did You Hear That? ¹

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 19, 2024 – Pentecost
Text: Acts 2:1-8

As I begin this morning, I want to draw your attention to the fact that this morning's message is a revised version of a sermon I first preached here back on Pentecost of 2012 – my first Pentecost with you as your Pastor. It was a year when Pentecost fell on Memorial Day weekend, so it touches on both Pentecost and Memorial Day themes. As I reread it in preparation for this Sunday, it still touched me as very relevant for the times in which we are living in 2024 so I am sharing it with you once again, especially in light of the death of one of the patriarchs of this church, Asael Hill, this past week. I'd love to hear your thoughts about that decision! Here goes...

When I was a little girl growing up in Western Pennsylvania, Memorial Day was a very confusing holiday. At least it was to me. On the one hand, it meant that the end of school and the glorious freedom of summertime wasn't far away. We'd often spend the holiday weekend opening up our summer cottage at the lake two hours north of our home outside Pittsburgh. The world made sense to me in these moments. Not because it actually did make sense, mind you, but more because my parents did all the worrying for me about how the world really worked. But I was still confused by Memorial Day.

Now we come to the other hand – the reason *why* it was so very confusing to me. Before we would leave for that trip to the

¹ Adapted from the sermon *What Does This Mean* first preached on May 27, 2012

summer cottage, there would come a day every year when my mother would load me into the Chevy station wagon as soon as I came home from school to, as she would say, “take care of something before the holiday weekend.” I would then find myself on a short trip that ended when my mom pulled into a what seemed to me to be a massive cemetery next to a yellow brick church. She slowly drove to a spot in the cemetery where she would park the car. We’d get out and she would open the tailgate door of the wagon to reveal a flat of deep red geraniums and gardening tools. I’d be handed the watering can and she would carry the flat of geraniums with her trowel and clippers tucked in amongst the blooming plants. We’d make our way gingerly through the headstones and occasionally Mom would tell me about family members long gone who were buried there. About halfway down a row, we’d stop by a fairly large brown marble stone engraved on one side with the name “WALTHER” in massive letters and on the other, two names with numbers under them. My mother would proceed to use her clippers to trim away the weeds from the base of the stone. Then she would use the trowel to dig around the base where she would lovingly plant the three or four geraniums she had brought. My job would always be to pour the water on them after they had been planted, Mom helping me lug the sloshing watering can from one of the outdoor spigots dotting the cemetery. Then, our task completed, we would put the tools and watering can back in the car and go home.

I cannot begin to tell you how confusing these trips were to me as a small child. They were a part of my Memorial Day experiences in my earliest childhood memories and I can tell you I was always wondering, what does this mean? Why are we doing

this? What is this field of funny stones anyway? When I got older I finally asked my mom these questions. It was then that she explained Memorial Day to me and how it was a tradition in her family to come to the cemetery and plant flowers on the graves of loved ones who had died. Then she would tell me that we were planting flowers on her father's grave, my grandfather who died just before I was born. I would listen to her stories and be glad I was part of something so important.

But part of me would remain totally confused about why we would do something like this for a stone – because that's all it was to me – a carved marble stone in a big field of other carved marble stones. I had never known the person my mother loved so dearly and remembered so poignantly on those long ago trips. To me, we were just planting flowers by a fancy rock. If it made her happy to do it, that was fine with me. If she wanted me to come, that was okay too. At least it was until I finally figured out what a cemetery was which was the same year I realized my very much alive grandmother's name was on the same stone where we were planting flowers for my dead grandfather. That's when a new truth clicked into place for me and I suddenly realized just what a cemetery was. Our Memorial Day cemetery trips were never the same after that.

This recollection of my childhood Memorial Day memories came powerfully to mind for me as I read the lectionary text for today, Pentecost Sunday. The Memorial Day holiday weekend and Pentecost do not always correspond to each other as neatly as they do this year (a reminder this was 2012), although they are usually within a few weeks of each other. The two observances actually have more in common with each other than you might

imagine. Memorial Day, initially known as Decoration Day, was first celebrated on May 30, 1868. It was originally intended to remember the dead soldiers of the Civil War by decorating their graves and monuments. The evolution of Decoration Day to Memorial Day began when the United States found itself embroiled in World War I as it became painfully clear that the war dead to be remembered would no longer be limited to one war. Memorial Day was originally held on May 30 because it was a date connected to no specific battle. The observation of Memorial Day moved to the last Monday in May when the Uniform Monday Holiday Act went into effect in 1971.

Pentecost has a similarly long history the meaning of which has changed over time. Pentecost is actually a celebration with deep roots in the Old Testament. Specified as a vitally important festival in the book of Leviticus, Pentecost was established to recall the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt in order to remind them of their obligation to remember all that God had done to give them their freedom and all that God expected from them in return for that freedom. “Pente” means 50 and Pentecost, also called Shavuot or the Festival of Weeks, was a festival to take place on the Sabbath following the last day of the seven weeks of seven days following Passover – thus 50 days. It was to celebrate this important Jewish festival that brought the disciples and other followers of Jesus to Jerusalem following his death – seven weeks earlier. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on Pentecost, and the extraordinary ways it was made real – tongues of flame and a cacophony of languages – which changed the meaning of this ancient Jewish festival for the followers of

Christ. Pentecost had now become the birthday of the Christian movement, the birthday of the church.

So, when we look at these two holidays side by side – Pentecost and Memorial Day – we can see they do have more in common than one might imagine. Both are essentially celebrations created and designed to recall the triumph of freedom over oppression and the obligation that freedom places upon us all to be worthy of this immeasurable gift. Memorial Day contains layers upon layers of recollections of all those who have given so deeply of themselves to protect us and our freedom. Similarly the layers of Pentecost enfolded those followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate it, only to find their whole world set on fire as the Holy Spirit swept into their midst. Freedom and responsibility took on a whole new meaning for them in that moment when everything changed. Jesus had kept his promise. The Holy Spirit had come and they were empowered to carry on Jesus' ministry in ways they could scarcely comprehend. Tongues of flame settled over them and suddenly they could speak so that everyone from every nation represented could understand them. No wonder strangers in the crowd were asking each other, "Did you hear that? They are speaking in our own languages! How is that possible?"

Our passage today from the book of Acts is one of the stories of Pentecost in the New Testament, undoubtedly the most well known version. It will come as no surprise that this story, like so many other significant stories from the bible, is at times a point of debate among biblical scholars. For example, they argue about whether the list of nations in the text is figurative or literal. They wonder if the noise that attracted the crowd was the noise of the

wind or the noise of the disciples talking so loudly in all these strange languages. The most interesting point of contention I came across, though, has to do with a dispute over the translation of that final question the text poses – “what does this mean?” One scholar I read argues that this is not an accurate translation of the Greek. He thinks a more accurate rendering of the question is, “what does he wish this to be?” I like this one! I think it’s probably much closer to what Jesus’ followers were actually asking each other in that incredible confusing moment when they could hardly believe what they were hearing, what they were experiencing. Think about it – Jesus promised before he died that the Holy Spirit would come to them to help them carry on – and 50 days later in the midst of a significant Jewish festival of remembrance, the Holy Spirit came. Jesus kept his promise. God kept his promise. So, it only makes sense to me that they would be asking each other --what does he wish this to be? Jesus said he would send us the Spirit and he did – what does he wish would happen now? What does he want us to do now that the Spirit is here as he promised? What does Jesus want from us now?

And that question is still the same for us, more than two thousand years later. What *does* Jesus wish this – our newfound reality in the Holy Spirit – to be? What does Jesus want from us now that the real significance of this gift of the Holy Spirit comes into sharper focus on Pentecost? I think that’s *the* question Pentecost raises for us: How is the Holy Spirit sent to us by God at the request of Jesus made manifest – made real – in our lives each day? What is our responsibility to make it real so that others will know by our example that this God stuff we say we believe in the church really matters? Are we open to being used by God to

make a difference – any difference, tiny or large – in the lives of the people around us every day? How might we allow ourselves to be open to the notion that it is the Holy Spirit of God blowing in the winds of change gusting through our church, our world and our lives?

That's the thing, isn't it? That's what we're afraid of if we think about this Pentecost story too deeply. It's nice and tame when we just think about it as the birthday of the church. It's nice and tame when we keep those Sunday School pictures of a circle of disciples with little flames dancing over their heads first and foremost in our celebrations of Pentecost. Wear red! Remember those little flames that look like birthday candles and help us celebrate the birthday of the church. Then go back to doing what you always do after the celebration dies down. Church is over and the red gets put away. Things go back to normal, whatever that means.

The only problem with this is – that's not Pentecost. Not really. Yes, Pentecost is about remembering and recalling important events in the history of our faith but it's really much more about change. Pentecost means God's Spirit is here now! Everything is different because of that! The presence of the Holy Spirit we celebrate on Pentecost means God is alive and well and in our midst, waiting right along with us to see what happens next. But – and here's the tricky part – the next move is up to us, as it has always been. God is here with us, ready to move forward with us, but that next step, that *first* step is ours alone to make – as individual followers of the Risen Christ and as members of this church.

So as Pentecost 2024 fades into history and Memorial Day Weekend beckons next weekend, I hope you will carry the message of change initiated by God forward in your lives each day. I hope you will remember that God is part of the change we are experiencing in every aspect of our lives and that hope is always inherent in change originating with God. I hope next weekend you'll remember loved ones now gone even as you anticipate those glorious days of summer soon to come. I also hope you'll see in those grill flames and campfires an invitation from God to remember the Holy Spirit is here now, and nothing will be the same again. Change is coming and, no matter how we might feel about that change, God is always, always, *always* in the middle of it. That's all we need to remember. Amen.