

**Sermon: Pentecost Sunday, June 5, 2022 – Acts 2: 1-21**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

At Pentecost we see evidence that diversity and unity can coexist. At the first Christian Pentecost, two different groups gathered with Holy intent in Jerusalem, at the same time: the followers of Jesus, mostly from Galilee, anticipating the gift of the Spirit; and Jewish people from around the Mediterranean who had come for the festival of Shavuot. Soon the Spirit was there as wind, as tongues of fire and as a variety of tongues being spoken and understood. There was but one Holy Spirit present on that day, but the activity of the Spirit was experienced and expressed in wonderfully diverse ways.

A month ago, our Chinook Winds Region of the United Church of Canada held its annual gathering in Red Deer, and our guest presenter was Rev Dr Janet Gear. She shared with us a model of understanding Church life which, for me, dovetails nicely with the simultaneous unity and diversity of Pentecost. She calls her model the *Theological Banquet*, utilizing the beautiful Biblical image (e.g. Matthew 22) of God's great big dining table where there is room for all. (Her use of various colours of the spectrum also fits pretty well with the start of Pride Month in much of Canada).

I have to admit that when I first encountered this model which puts names to a number of modes of Christian belief, I wasn't particularly drawn to it, but in Red Deer, I was won over. This was in part because Janet was so up-front in acknowledging that there were both "lovers and loathers" of this way of viewing Church and Christian practice, and in the presence of both lovers and loathers she assured us that the purpose of this model was not to box anyone in... but rather to describe the things that different varieties of Christians are drawn to DO – the ways that different people feel compelled to LIVE OUT their faith in a God who is active in the world – all the while affirming that there is a wide range of faithful ways to respond to God's call.

This model begins, not with your stated beliefs, but on the faith-based actions and activities that you are drawn to do, the aspects of Church life you would say are most central: not what you think "should" be the right answer, but the things you actually DO find yourself drawn to do. Especially in these early days of re-connecting, in-person, the theological banquet helps us acknowledge that while most of us missed SOMETHING about Church life during the pandemic, the "something" that was missed the most, won't be the same for everyone.

Here, then, are the five categories, along with a one sentence credo that describes how each grouping lives out its faith life.

EVANGELICAL: we share Jesus with others

ECCLESIAL: we worship and learn about God

MISSIONAL: we go where the need is, in service

ECUMENICAL: we work for social change

SPIRITUAL: we open our lives to holiness and wisdom

Now, don't get too caught up in the titles of each group – I found that the term "ecumenical", for example, has quite a different meaning here than the way I would use the word – but rather, see if one of those statements of purpose aligns with the primary way that you express your identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ... or the most important aspect of Church life, as you see it. Some of you, I expect, will see a fit right away. You may also find

yourself reacting to some words that don't describe how you are *now* but may have described you at another point in life – you may have been raised in one way, for example, but chosen something very different as an adult. For others, at first glance you might straddle a couple of these; or perhaps none of it is quite ringing true and, well, it is what it is.

One of the things that I find most helpful in this model, is that Janet associates each of these five ways of being with a colour, which is used consistently throughout her work so even if you forget the name of your grouping, you probably remember the colour! As she puts it, a person's faith is likely multi-coloured or as she says "kaleidoscopic", especially if we have worked on some parts of our faith life that don't come naturally, yet "it will have a dominant or foundational tint" – a primary way we are most drawn to, which changes how we see things.

As mentioned, this model begins not with what I *believe*, but with *the things I do in response to God, the activities and actions I find myself drawn to*. That assumes that there *is* an active component to my faith life and it also assumes that *God is not just conceptual*: God has agency, God is at work even now, transforming the world we live in. With that in mind, let's take another look at the five groupings, and how they perceive God at work in the world:

(yellow) EVANGELICAL: God transforms the world through the saving work of Jesus

(red) ECCLESIAL: God transforms the world through the church, a God-created community filled with grace and hope

(purple) MISSIONAL: God transforms the world through seeing human needs and addressing them in practical ways

(blue) ECUMENICAL: God transforms the world through naming and confronting systemic evil in the world

(green) SPIRITUAL: God transforms the world through spiritual practises that recognise the sacredness in life, moving us toward personal healing and wholeness.

This way of expressing the hearts of the different diners at the Theological Banquet, and the ways these groupings see God at work, begs the question: if *God* is up to these things in the world, what is the *Church* called to be and do? How can I, with joy and enthusiasm, let God's light shine through the particular tint of my life, as if I were part of a stained-glass artwork, each person's tint influencing the light such that the totality of it all reflects God's own beauty?

In looking at the ways that various people reflect various aspects of God's work, Rev Dr Gear underlines that we are called to ONENESS in Christ, not SAMENESS in Christ. (There's that Pentecost diversity and unity again – one Spirit but a wide spectrum of expressions!) However we live out our faith, whatever theology helps us interpret the world and gives shape to our particular calling, WE ARE CALLED TO BEAR WITNESS TO LOVE. The tint of that love might be red or yellow or green or blue or purple, but it's still love.

I have one more diagram to show you before I ask a question. This time, the question is, "what feeds your soul?" – and what kinds of responses by others, fills your heart?

EVANGELICAL: I am filled and fed when people come alive in Christ

ECCLESIAL: I am filled and fed by a full Church on Sunday morning

MISSIONAL: I am filled and fed by practical, community-based outreach projects

ECUMENICAL: I am filled and fed by political actions and activism, naming and confronting systemic evil in the world

SPIRITUAL: I am filled and fed by going deep with God, the sacred ground of being.

Just to be clear, this diagram is more *my* interpretation than *Janet's* words, but I think it is consistent with her overall presentation of the five priorities... and prepares us for a question. Just to humour the guy in the pulpit, I'd like you to consider these categories, and which of these colour groupings you are most drawn to in the way your faith gets put into action. If none of these Theological Banquet categories really speak to you, that's OK, but if one of them speaks to you, make a mental note of what that is, and if it is too soon to decide between two of them, it's OK for the moment to claim two. Now close your eyes, and keep them closed, and when I call out the colour and name of the group that you identify with and what tends to fill your hearts, put up your hand and keep it up until I tell you I've finished the count. So,

EVANGELICAL (yellow)

ECCLESIAL (red)

MISSIONAL (purple)

ECUMENICAL (blue)

SPIRITUAL (green)

OK, I've got the information I need... you can open your eyes now.

At our gathering in Red Deer, the table group discussions about this model started on Thursday night, and by the time Saturday arrived, we broke out of previous table groups to get together with others of that same colour/group for a chunk of the afternoon. In that single-colour group we told stories, we shared joys and frustrations, and I have to admit that there was a degree of relief in being with a group with a similar perspective. Clearly, we weren't entirely of one mind or style – imagine the difference between olive green and emerald green – but it was still a sense of ease in the group. But in addition to celebrating unique strengths of this way of being, Janet also had us look at the “shadow side” of our grouping, things that can, at their worst, work directly *against* the Spirit. This diagram from Rev Dr Gear, shows one typical strength, and a frequently experienced shadow, related to each category. While I'm not going to comment on these, it was helpful to know that none of these paths was all strength, none was all shadow, and it was hopeful to think that none of the shadows are so strong that they cannot be fixed. Much of the fixing, in fact, can be mobilized by interacting with the other groups!

	STRENGTH	SHADOW
EVANGELICAL	Intimacy	Exclusive
ECCLESIAL	Commitment	Consumerist
MISSIONAL	Concrete	Naïve
ECUMENICAL	Broad Scope	Ideological
SPIRITUAL	Discipline	self centered

To be fair, I have attempted to distill Janet's system of understanding Christian identity and Church life, which should take about 10 hours, into about 15 minutes. But there is a particular reason for sharing this image of the Theological Banquet, and the various attendees of the banquet, on this Pentecost Day, and it is this: after two years spent mostly apart, it's going to take some time to figure out who we are as a gathered entity, and not everyone is going to understand or live that out in the same way. In case you're wondering, when I did that not-very-scientific survey earlier in the sermon, <results> it was evident that we are not a monochromatic or homogeneous group here. Similar to the way the holy light of God gets refracted out into so many beautiful colours, this gathered group is much more like a rainbow, than like a team all wearing one identical jersey. Our oneness in Christ is not *diminished* by some of us being more drawn to social action, and others to spiritual practice, it is *strengthened* and *filled out* by that; and while I may be able to identify the place in this model that best describes where I am right now, it can open me to other ways of being that I may not be naturally drawn to, but am curious to get to know better.

Whether we are looking at Jesus and his first disciples, or that group of Christian and Jewish believers at Pentecost in Jerusalem, or the folks who have gathered here in the Church or are watching at home, or the great variety of people who in the communities we live in: unless we have chosen to only connect with people of similar hearts and minds, life in community reminds us that there are many ways to bring and be God's love. As an affirming ministry, I hope we are well committed to the fullness and brightness that comes when all these colours of light come together. No matter where we see ourselves in all this, we are called to rejoice in the ways this takes root in your life, and have a healthy curiosity for ways that don't really call your name.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I invite you to envision with me, my friends, a banqueting table where the diversity is delightful: a table with foods from many lands, conversations in many languages, discussions on many topics, inspired by a God who loves each one of us and the totality of all of us. In all the colours and flavours and fragrances of that banquet, may love be known. Amen.

For further reading:

Gear, Janet. <https://www.leadershiftpm.ca/the-theological-banquet>

Gear, Janet. *Undivided Love*. © 2022.

<https://books.friesenpress.com/store/title/119734000231789479/Janet-Gear-Undivided-Love>

"Spiritual Gifts" - <https://www.gotquestions.org/spiritual-gifts-list.html>

Willimon, Will. *Interpretation: Acts*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1988.

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