

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Third Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 14, 2026**  
**9:30 AM**

Texts: Acts 10:44-48, Colossians 3:1-17

Theme: Pentecost People: Embracing Diversity

[prayer]

After Pentecost, the early church was confronted with the question of what to do with non-Jews – called Greeks or Gentiles – who wished to follow Jesus. In the first few years after Jesus's crucifixion, the Church was comprised almost entirely of devout Jews. Jewish religious customs still held sway. And among those customs were restrictions on whether and how Jews could interact with non-Jews. Typically, Jews refrained from breaking bread with Gentiles, and there were types of food that Gentiles ate but Jews did not. And then there was the even bigger question of whether an uncircumcised Gentile could be baptized and received into the covenant community of the Church.

This is the context for our call to worship today from Acts 10. The Apostle Peter has received an incredible vision about a man named Cornelius. Cornelius has had his own personal encounter with the Risen Jesus, and he wants to be baptized. But there's a problem: He's an uncircumcised Gentile. Until this point, Peter and the other apostles have assumed that the good news is for Jews only. But God gently corrects Peter and commands him to go to Cornelius's house and baptize him. Upon arriving and hearing Cornelius's testimony, Peter makes this humble but powerful confession:

“I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another...Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34, 43 CEB)

This is really a remarkable confession, because Cornelius is not just any Gentile. He is an officer in the Roman army – a representative of the very empire that has oppressed Peter's people and executed their Messiah. Cornelius represents

everything that Peter, a devout Jew, is supposed to despise. And yet here Peter is, watching the Holy Spirit descend on his enemy.

In Acts, there are two Pentecosts. The first happens in Acts 2 – the birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the Jews assembled in Jerusalem. But the second Pentecost happens in Acts 10. We call this Pentecost the “Gentile Pentecost,” when the Holy Spirit is poured out on Cornelius and his household. In that moment, Peter, who had witnessed the first Pentecost, is forced to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is no respecter of religious custom. Instead, she breaks down the barriers between Jew and Gentile and releases a spiritual revolution on the world.

Honestly, Peter shouldn’t have been surprised over God’s acceptance of Cornelius. Since the days of Abraham, God was clear salvation would one day be for all people. The Gentile Pentecost marks a turning point in the life of the early church. It also marks a turning point for Peter. Peter is converted to God’s vision for the Church. And the Church is going to look a whole lot more diverse than Peter imagined.

Robert Wall writes in his commentary on Acts that “God’s pastoral project is to bring us into an understanding of God’s will so that we may better collaborate with God in the work of salvation.”<sup>1</sup> God’s plan of salvation assumes our participation; our baptisms make us kingdom co-creators with God. It was not until Peter changed his mind about Cornelius that God’s mission to the Gentiles began. Peter’s participation in God’s mission depended on whether his imagination was big enough to embrace what God was doing.

When I consider the Gospel’s embrace of diversity, I think of the language we use in our tradition when we baptize someone or receive them as a professing member. This is one of the questions we ask:

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,  
put your whole trust in his grace,  
and promise to serve him as your Lord,  
in union with the Church which Christ has opened*

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<sup>1</sup> “The Acts of the Apostles” by Robert W. Wall. *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume X: Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 171.

*to people of all ages, nations, and races?*<sup>2</sup>

*People of all ages, nations, and races.* We believe that the Church should embrace diversity precisely because of the work of God in Jesus Christ – that through the blood of Christ *all* people can be reconciled to God. Christ has fulfilled the ancient Jewish covenant that was based on circumcision and the Law. In its place he has made a new covenant through his blood, and now anyone who receives Christ with faith and repentance can be baptized into the universal Church.

What ultimately unifies the Church is not our creeds and customs, the language we speak, the songs we sing, how we interpret Scripture, whether we practice infant or believers' baptism, how we celebrate communion, etc. Whole denominations have been formed over these issues, and while they are their own reflection of diversity, they are subordinate to what actually unifies us as Christians: Our confession through the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.

It's that simple.

This confession is how the early church was able to make a radical counter witness to the prevailing culture of its time by gathering into its fellowship people of different races, genders, generations, and socioeconomic conditions. In the words of Paul's letter to the Galatians, "You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise" (3:26-29 CEB).

This language of clothing ourselves with Christ is carried over into the Letter to the Colossians. Scholars debate whether Paul actually wrote Colossians, but the letter undeniably continues Pauline themes in statements like this one: "You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that creator there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>

uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!” (Col 3:9-11 NRSVue).

The language of taking off the old human nature and putting on the new nature of Christ is a baptismal allusion. When we are baptized, we die to our old selves and are raised to a new way of living, one where we are being conformed to the Way of Jesus.

As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul is less interested in uniformity of custom than he is uniformity of character. He is deeply concerned with the public witness that Christians make through their behavior – the way we treat each other and the way we treat our neighbors. For Paul, the witness of our actions is just as important as our verbal confession that Jesus is Lord and Savior, because if the way we behave does not evidence a transformed heart and life, then our confession is ultimately null and void. Paul commands us to clothe ourselves with love, “which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (v. 14). As the song says, they will know we are Christians by our love<sup>3</sup> – for one another, for our neighbors and, critically, for the people who are so different from us that we count them as our enemies.

The Church sadly continues to neglect our boundary-transcending witness by sorting itself and excluding based on manmade categories: Catholic, Protestant; mainline, evangelical; liberal, conservative. One of my seminary professors remarked that Sunday mornings are the most segregated morning in America. She was speaking specifically about race and how few multiracial churches exist. But I think her observation also applies to other areas – local churches that only reflect one type of family, for example, or one generation, or one economic class.

Pentecost People embrace diversity because diversity is part of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The account of the coming of the Spirit in Acts, to both Jews and Gentiles, emphasizes that the active presence of the Spirit affirms diversity. It is the coming of the Spirit that transforms Peter’s reluctance to welcome Gentiles into the church. In Paul’s epistles it is the Spirit who creates diversity and difference by distributing diverse gifts to the congregation. His letters emphasize that Christ unites very diverse people without eliminating their difference. The Spirit of God both affirms and creates diversity in the church.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/we\\_are\\_one\\_in\\_the\\_spirit](https://hymnary.org/text/we_are_one_in_the_spirit)

We have a lot of work to do to embrace the diverse union God desires among His children. I believe that the only way we can begin to heal our divisions and embrace the diversity is by prioritizing our common confession over our differences. This does not mean we erase our differences or ignore places where harm has and continues to be done. But I believe that when we focus on the common confession that unites us – that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior – and what that confession means for us all, then we will be more inclined to bear with one another in love despite our differences. And when we learn to bear with each other in love, then perhaps we can begin to appreciate and embrace our diversity rather than feeling the need to separate one from another.

As John Wesley commented, “For by that one Spirit, which we received in baptism, we are all united in one body. Whether Jews or gentiles - Who are at the greatest distance from each other by nature. Whether slaves or freemen - Who are at the greatest distance by law and custom. We have all drank of one Spirit - In that cup, received by faith, we all imbibed one Spirit, who first inspired, and still preserves, the life of God in our souls.”<sup>4</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> NT Notes, 1 Corinthians 12:13