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## *Come Down, O Love Divine*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Pentecost Sunday – Year C**

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For years now I've been searching the internet for this one particular diversity joke. It's an off-beat kind of joke that some people don't find to be very funny. That may be because it starts out sounding like it's for diversity but the ending has a little twist that sounds exactly opposite. Still it's a joke I heard at a diversity workshop where the leader was trying to help people laugh about issues we often feel so serious or anxious about; you know, the usual issues involving racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism or homophobia—and the list goes on. Well I finally found the joke this week after searching the internet one more time. It came to mind while I was previewing the scriptures appointed for today's celebration of Pentecost. In the Pentecost story we just heard from the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles with tongues of flame and they begin speaking in tongues of different languages. As many commentaries tell you this speaking in tongues has been interpreted as a kind of holy reversal of humanity's original diversity issues.

That's right: the problem of human diversity goes all the way back to that story in the Book of Genesis—the “Tower of Babel” story. When all the peoples of the earth had “one language and the same words” they gathered to build a tower to heaven, and when God “came down to see the city and the tower” God said,

“Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech”

[So] ... they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth (Genesis 11:1, 5-9).

So today's Pentecost reading from the Book of Acts can be read as the Holy Spirit reversing that supernatural catastrophe by means of a supernatural remedy.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting ... And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard [the apostles] speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked ... "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us ... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:2, 6-8, 11-12)

In our theology of Pentecost it means that the Holy Spirit comes down to make us able to understand one another despite the diverse languages that continue to distinguish us from one another. That's right: we continue to be differently identified by language and culture but now those differences are mediated by the one Spirit who commonly indwells, animates and empowers us. Now different Christians have different views about precisely how the Spirit creates unity in the midst of our diversity—in the midst of the diversity that still prevails among us. Certainly we have tried for 2000 years to make everyone on earth confess the same Christian creed or evangelical faith statements. But today many of us think that this was a misguided mission and that the Spirit has all along had something else in mind. And that brings me back to

where I started a few minutes ago—back to that diversity joke that I finally found on the internet.

Again I alert you that it's off-beat in a way that some people don't find funny. And I wonder if that's because it begins by seeming to be in favor of diversity but just at the end it takes an unexpected turn. Some people find that turn hilarious but others don't get it. Well let's see how you react. At the very least remember the context of someone trying to help people laugh about issues we take too seriously to allow ourselves to be amused.

[A city bus driver is doing his route.](#) Top of Form After picking up some passengers, an argument about race breaks out. Most of the passengers on the bus are getting involved and after twenty minutes of bickering the driver, tired of the argument, slams on the brakes and stops in the middle of the street.

Everyone shuts up. He stands up and shouts at them, "I'm TIRED of this. I'm an old man and I can't bear to listen to this arguing anymore. From now on, there's no black, there's no white, got it?"

[And then he says:]

"We're all the same color. We're all green. Now everyone sit down, dark green in back, light green in front." [www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/38ltap/a\\_city\\_bus\\_driver\\_is\\_doing\\_his\\_route](http://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/38ltap/a_city_bus_driver_is_doing_his_route)

Okay! Maybe that went by too fast. So let me repeat the punch line:

"We're all the same color. We're all green. Now everyone sit down, dark green in back, light green in front."

Oh well, like I said: some people find that funny and some not. But if I were asked what makes it funny I would say it's the irony—where irony means contrary to expectations. So in the joke we're expecting that an authority figure has stepped up at last to mediate conflict and point the way to our nobler selves. And then suddenly, contrary to expectations, he shows that he's just as susceptible to prejudice and bias regardless of what he was saying before.

And isn't that the human condition? And isn't that what humor is good for: to help us laugh at ourselves and, to that extent, take ourselves that much less seriously? For us human beings and Christians too, are perennially inclined to exclude from God's unconditional love and providential care those whom God insists on including in divine compassion and grace. As Jesus says famously at the end of his Sermon on the Mount:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

And as he said to the Pharisees who asked why Jesus consorted with tax-collectors and sinners:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-13).

So that is what the Holy Spirit is given for. The Spirit makes us one in-the-Spirit by bringing to birth and fruition in us a genuine embrace of human diversity. It's a full spectrum of diversity that includes at one end of the spectrum persons and groups who are truly violent, vicious, or depraved. For such persons we are called to pray and work for their transformation. At the other end of the spectrum we find persons or groups that are truly noble, just and righteous, or those who are simply innocent. But regardless of where on the spectrum of human diversity we find persons and peoples we are called to 'be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.' One commentator has elaborated that call with the following reflections.

The difference between God's [love and ours] is that we always leave someone out of God's family; with our father as the Accuser, we will always be over against someone ... But God in Jesus sends us the Paraclete, the Defender of the Accused, that we may have our divisions healed and become one family ... In order that we may be in the process of becoming one family, Jesus fulfills the law by giving us the only commandment we need to achieve it: love one another as he has loved us . . . St. Paul [in Romans 13:8-10] follows Jesus by interpreting love as the sole goal of the

law. Only the law as love is capable of fulfilling the promise to Abraham that we can become the one human family of God.

—Andrew Marr, “Adoption as God’s Children” (<http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/pentecost/> accessed 5/14/2016)

And this is why we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. For today we pay tribute to the Spirit’s power to enable us to love despite our recurring tendency to be like that city bus driver in my diversity joke. And finally I conclude with one of our classic hymns, a hymn that honors the power of the Spirit to return us again and again to our Lord’s call to love—to love inclusively all people. Here are the words to the hymn assigned for the close of our service today: “Come Down, O Love Divine,” Hymn 516 in our hymnbook there in your pew rack (*The Hymnal 1982*; New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985).

Come down, O love divine,  
seek thou this soul of mine,  
and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;  
O Comforter, draw near,  
within my heart appear,  
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn,  
till earthly passions turn  
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;  
and let thy glorious light  
shine ever on my sight,  
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong,  
with which the soul will long,  
shall far outpass the power of human telling;  
for none can guess its grace,  
till Love create a place  
wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling. [www.oremus.org/hymnal/c/c186.html](http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/c/c186.html)