



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost (A)

Life Is a Team Sport

[RCL] Acts 2:1-21 or Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 or Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39

It's Pentecost. It's also graduation season. It's a time when valedictorians are crowned. We imagine valedictorians to be on their way to a lot of success. That is largely true, but maybe not in the way that we might imagine. A study came out in 1995 published by Boston College researcher Karen Arnold which found that high school valedictorians don't often grow up to become millionaires or the world's innovators. This study followed 81 valedictorians for 14 years after graduation.

It is true that in those 14 years, 90% of them end up in professional careers, becoming doctors and lawyers, and 40% had already reached the top tier of their fields. However, they did not usually grow up to become famous innovators. The theory expounded upon in the book *Barking Up the Wrong Tree* by Eric Barker is that academic success encourages conformity rather than free thought. Real geniuses, Barker posited, tend to struggle in school.

That may be so, but *thank God* someone is really good at learning the rules and playing the game well — we would all agree that we *need* ordinary doctors, and we would all be pleased to learn that our physician was once a valedictorian. We need ordinary doctors and lawyers and accountants and teachers. We need ordinary construction workers and mechanics and plumbers and factory workers and farmers.

Society wouldn't *run* without all kinds of humans. Life is a team sport. Instead of acknowledging this, we miss it, trying to figure out who's inferior to whom based on a number of factors — academic success being only one.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”

Blink twice and you might miss that opening line as if it were some insignificant detail. But then you remember that Luke, the guy who wrote Acts, was probably a physician, and doctors — valedictorians or not — don't tend to give insignificant details. This event was for *all* of the disciples. No one could be missing.

They all get the same gift — the Holy Spirit — but at the same time, they *don't* all get the same gifts. They are all individuals, and the Holy Spirit would hit them in different ways. Immediately, they would even begin to speak in different languages, differentiating them from the very beginning.

There's a reason we talk about the Holy Spirit in terms of fire and wind. Fire and wind are not things that we can easily control. Fire and wind are also not things whose form, intensity, or effects always look the same.

It won't take long before Paul will start writing of the fruits of the spirit and the different gifts of the Spirit — not least because differently gifted people start to clash. In 1 Corinthians, a letter Paul wrote to church folks who couldn't stop bickering, he wrote, "Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

He'll write to the folks in Rome about how it's the *Spirit* who makes the church work. It's why we've got folks willing to preach, others willing to teach Sunday school, others who are good at serving others or providing hospitality or fixing things or cutting the grass or visiting people in the hospital or cleaning out the gutters. The Holy Spirit makes this whole messy church thing work. Our differences as humans make the *world* work.

Life is a team sport.

We often talk about how we are deeply divided as a people. We sometimes seem to occupy completely different realities than our neighbors. A 2017 New York Times article about how we assume, politically, that we are so divided because of filter bubbles and what we call "confirmation bias": we gravitate towards opinions that are already the same as ours.

This article posited that maybe we're conflating confirmation bias — wanting what we think to be confirmed — with the related desirability bias — wanting to be told what we want to hear. Confirmation bias and desirability bias usually are the same for us in our politics: what we *want to believe* is what we believe. But it's not always true of life: quite often we think bad things will happen even if we don't *want* them to. In other words, a pessimist doesn't *want to believe* that the world to burn, they just *believe* it will.

But in order to change your politics, you have to *want to believe* something different. It doesn't usually matter if the facts presented contradict our beliefs — we cling ever more tightly to the reality that we *want* to believe. The article was pessimistically entitled, "You're Not Going to Change Your Mind."¹

But we've all changed our minds on something before, even when it was difficult to do so. We all have things we used to believe strongly that we don't believe anymore. Often, it is because we met someone —

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/27/opinion/sunday/youre-not-going-to-change-your-mind.html>

somebody who was affected directly by whatever thing we had an opinion about. As Harvey Milk, the first openly LGBTQ elected official, would often say: “They vote for us 2 to 1 if they know they know one of us.”

We are different, and we are divided. We all generally agree that we don’t like the state of things. But if anything’s going to change, in the church or outside of it, as much as we may hate it, we need each other. We need someone who believes differently and has a completely different experience than we do.

Life is a team sport.

Many will tritely call us all to just *talk*, as if that would solve things. *Talk!?* we think sarcastically. *Why didn’t we think of that?!* But you know, maybe things might get better if we stopped yelling at each other on the Internet and over the dinner table and started meeting with a common identity to ask and answer questions we can all wrestle with: Why are we here? What keeps you up at night? What keeps you going? What is precious to you? And finally, after we talk for a while about those things, we can ask: What can we do together?

There are many places this *can* happen, but it’s been happening for centuries in places of worship. Religion has for sure been a destructive force in the world, but it also has a way of helping us get real. It asks us who we are and why we’re here and where we’re going and it doesn’t work if we’re all the same.

Life is a team sport.

Of course, it’s not easy to do life together. The Holy Spirit is wind and flame: it can be comforting, like a campfire or a gentle breeze — or it can be too hot, even destructive, and highly uncomfortable. The same is true of church. But “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.”

We are here together. You, sitting there, *you* are part of *us*, the church, gifted with the Holy Spirit and your own gifts. You have experiences that no one else here has. You can do things no one else can do. And it won’t always be easy, but we’re here, and we’re together. The Holy Spirit has descended upon us all again, making us unique, and making us one.

It’s good to be on the same team. Amen.

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor based in South Hadley, Massachusetts. She has served a fantastic little parish called Our Savior’s Lutheran Church for seven years. Anna was born and raised in Alabama, and considers Atlanta her second home. She graduated from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in 2011 and has served in a variety of settings since then, including both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, she enjoys hiking, CrossFit, and music of all kinds.