

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
19 May 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Pentecost Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Same, Different, Amazing”

Acts 2:1-21

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Just about a year ago, Pastor Morgan led a group of us from Calvary on a Civil Rights Road Trip. Our last stop was at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center in Little Rock. The mission of the Center is to preserve, interpret, and celebrate African American history and culture in Arkansas, highlighting entrepreneurs, artists, and innovators. Within the Center is the delightfully colorful and creative children's gallery called, *"Same Different Amazing."*¹

The photo on the cover of your Order of Worship is the first mural you see when you enter the exhibit.



¹ Sean Clancy, "Interactive gallery at Mosaic Templars center teaches Arkansas kids all people are 'Same Different Amazing'" *Arkansas Democrat Gazette Online* (Sept. 13, 2021), accessed on May 19, 2024 at <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2021/sep/13/interactive-gallery-at-mosaic-templars-center/>.

The museum's director, Quantia Fletcher (who goes by "Key") describes this exhibit for children as a place where kids can come in and see a representation of themselves in the museum; her vision was to have "a dedicated interactive children's space inside of a Black history museum, something she had not seen anywhere else."²

Growing up Key said people in her generation were taught that 'different' was not to be discussed, but rather ignored 'in a polite Southern way.' She and her team took a different approach because "things are not the *same* for us all when there's exclusion *based on difference*."³ "What we wanted to show with the title is that [our humanity makes us the same and gives us a reason to see each other in one another AND there is nothing wrong with

² Antoinette Grajeda, "Mosaic Templars Children's Gallery Highlights How Different is Amazing," *Arkansas Soul* (Sept. 16, 2021), accessed on May 19, 2024 at <https://argotsoul.com/2021/09/mosaic-templars-childrens-gallery-highlights-how-different-is-amazing/>.

³ Grajeda, *ibid*.

being different, in fact our differences are what make us unique. Understanding “Diversity and inclusion starts really early,” she says.⁴

One of the most popular parts of the exhibit is an interactive touch screen featuring 30 characters that all have different ethnicities, religions, income levels, background stories, physical features;⁵ some come from homes with a mom and dad, some are from blended families or foster families, some have gay parents; some speak English, some use American Sign Language or speak Spanish.⁶

Above this character screens is the question “*How are we the same?*” The kids are supposed to look at these characters and name what they have in common with them, even as other aspects of their lives might be unfamiliar to them. For example, Lyrick, Key’s ten-year-old daughter, was one of the first kids to test out the space. Lyrick saw a child with dark skin like her, that had a mom and dad like her and lived in a house like her, but then she saw a symbol of dyslexia next to

the girl and she asked her mom what that was. Key explained it to her, and they ended up having conversations about which characters had aspects of their lives that were like us, and which ones were different;⁷ they talked about all kinds of things that we typically don’t give intentional education around. In that moment Key realized this was a safe space for curiosity – about other people, but also ourselves.

There’s also a wall where children can play with magnetic discs that represent different interests—sports, hobbies, religion, favorite school subjects—things they feel make them unique. In this space, kids discuss how they see themselves in relation to the world. After naming their differences, they get their picture taken under the phrase “*I am amazing because...*” And they pick magnetic word balloons that they want to put on the wall to describe themselves, words like: “smart,” “kind,” “helpful,” “brave,” and “friendly.”⁸ Through the word balloons, parents learn *how their children see themselves* and then they

⁴ Clancy, *ibid.*

⁵ Grajeda, *ibid.*

⁶ Clancy, *ibid.*

⁷ Clancy, *ibid.*

⁸ Clancy, *ibid.*

can use that information to support their development.⁹

“The ability to define oneself for oneself is power,” Key says. “It’s a very important part of the Black experience especially, and crucial for development in all children,” so that is why “everything ties back to identity.”¹⁰ It invites you to think about who you are, what makes you like other kids (*same*), what makes you unique or special (*different*), and ultimately, how the combination of those two makes you *amazing*...and how that makes everyone else amazing too.

In fact, the final section is the ‘call to action’ area. There’s a large video screen behind a door that features scenes from places like a library, a neighborhood garden, and an animal shelter that asks children how they can use their talents and gifts to help out in their community¹¹...how they can turn their unique combination of *Same* and *Different* into something *Amazingly Good for the World*.

Feels like a very Pentecost-y message, doesn’t it?

Pentecost is a celebration we Christians, and churches around the world, all hold in common. *And* it emphasizes our differences in powerful ways; it names how essential they are. And in fact, it is the combination of these two things – a common place and faith and experience in Jerusalem (*Same*), expressed in unique and diverse languages (*Different*), that creates such a sweeping spirit of change and that ultimately leads to 3,000 people being baptized by the end of Acts chapter 2 (*Amazing*).

In fact, the leading report from Luke (the author of Acts) on this Pentecost event is that people were “*amazed and astonished*” (vs 7) as they heard Galileans speaking in their own native languages from their homelands. They couldn’t wrap their minds around it; Luke says again, “*all were amazed and perplexed, saying ‘what does this mean?’*” (vs 12).

Indeed, Peter is prompted to curb any rumors about this occasion being due to folks having one drink too many, and thus gives an amazing first sermon, casting a vision from the prophet Joel about the Spirit

⁹ Grajeda, *ibid*.

¹⁰ Grajeda, *ibid*.

¹¹ Clancy, *ibid*.

being poured out on all flesh, including those who are enslaved—envisioning liberation for all, including women, saying sons and daughters will prophesy, and even more, that the young will see visions and the old will dream dreams. That's the reverse of what we normally hear, right? Usually we say the young people are the ones with dreams about the future, but here it is the older folk. And usually it's the older, wiser folk who have visions from their ancestors or other memories in their past, but here it is the younger people sharing visions. And all of this upside-down, multi-language, multi-cultural amazing-ness, Peter says, results in everyone who calls on the name of the Lord being saved, or *sozo* in the Greek, which means, "*healed, preserved, protected, made whole.*"¹²

So as we conclude our yearlong series "*It is Well...*" and name what it takes for *the world* to be made well and for *we ourselves* to be well—it seems that Acts chapter 2 is just as good a place as any to *end*, because it invites us to, *begin* again.

Pentecost is the beginning of our collective story as 'the church.' We call it the birthday of the church, that is, the day when the Spirit of the Living God (*pneuma* in Greek, *ruach* in Hebrew) swept into the disciples' lives, giving them collective breath and new language to include others as co-creators of the kin-dom of God; they expanded their community and their reach.

And isn't it curious that it's not the flaming tongues of fire on their heads that causes the amazement and wonder, but rather the fact that they started speaking in the native languages of the people in the crowd? It was the tongues of language, not the tongues of fire that caused amazement. There is a lesson here for us...about the importance of inclusiveness over impressiveness in our ministries.

So all of that is how we get to the *Amazing*, but let's back up a bit in the text to look at the *Same* and the *Different*.

What is the *Same*? Well, the Same part here is that all of these people are gathered in one place, together at one time. Yes,

¹² Strong's Concordance, as accessed through Blue Letter Bible on May 19, 2024

(<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4982/kjv/tr/0-1/>).

the twelve disciples and presumably other close followers of Jesus were gathered in Jerusalem, however so were thousands of other Jews from all surrounding areas. This is because what became Pentecost for Christians, but it was originally a Jewish festival, *Shavuot*, feast of Weeks, or the first harvest of the grain, which occurred 50 days following the feast of Passover. The significance of 50 is that day 50 is the day that comes after seven weeks (7 weeks x 7 days per week = 49). So 50 becomes the day that culminates the perfect ‘week of weeks’ (7 was believed to be a perfect number). That’s part of why the tradition evolved to not just be a celebration of harvest, but the time when Jews gathered at the Temple to celebrate the *giving of the Law*, the Torah, to the whole nation of Israel. Because following the law was completeness, or wholeness, in Jewish tradition. So what is the *Same* in this text is that all these Jews are:

- 1) gathered in the same place – Jerusalem, to
- 2) celebrate the same festival and law (Torah), which
- 3) honors God and the faith they share, and as a result they all

4) are experiencing the Spirit of the Living God doing something in their midst

What is *Different* in this text?

Well, the experience of these gathered Jews is different. For one group, they are speaking in languages they did not know for the first time ever. For the other group, they were hearing their own languages (15 different ones!) spoken for the first in a long time. It’s the synergy of these two different groups in this same experience that creates the ‘amazing.’

For the disciples, the followers of Jesus, who are visited by fire and the rushing wind of the Spirit, they have the experience of all the sudden speaking in real languages that we have no reason to believe that they knew before. Or if they did, these languages were certainly not their native tongue. It would be like me saying I can speak Spanish. I can speak some phrases of Spanish, but not well and not fluently. So their miraculous experience was just all the sudden hearing words come from their mouth in ways they had never spoken before. It was a sweeping of the Spirit within them that resulted in an external expression of language.

And then for all the other group, they had been living under occupation and not able to speak their own languages, plus now they are also visitors out from out of town in a new place. What we know from them is that *they* truly understand, clearly, what is being spoken, in their own language. So for them the experience of the Spirit sweeping through them was an external hearing of their own language, that then landed within them, in their hearts and minds in a way they could understand.

Have you ever been in a different country, confused and a bit bewildered, trying to make out the language, google translate open and trying to find your way or ask a question, perhaps you are lost, and all the sudden you hear someone speaking English, or whatever your native language is? That sound cuts to you like a knife; your ear picks it up in a sea of all the other sounds because of how familiar and comforting it is in a cacophony of difference. I imagine this is what it was like for these folks gathered from all these countries. How comforting it must have been to hear their *own* language in a place they never expected to. It's truly an

amazing, unexpected, radically inclusive act of hospitality!

This is a big lesson for us on Pentecost. As we remember the birthday of the church, we're celebrating that those who knew Jesus most intimately and well, those first disciples. And they show us how to "be the church" by first speaking the language of others, not expecting others to already know the language *they* were speaking. They embrace diversity, inviting it into their midst as an advantage, a blessing, as the way to grow and learn and heal. They don't just rely on what they already know.

It is precisely these *different* languages – that make the Spirit's work on Pentecost successful. Difference drew people in. Difference allowed everyone to hear a good word. Difference made room for all people to be included. Difference drew the circle wider.

Pentecost shows that salvation, *sozo*, the healing, saving, work of the Spirit, and thus the healing, saving, "making whole" work of we, the people of God, is about honoring and celebrating difference, and allowing that difference to

amaze us, astonish us, and invite us to new visions and dreams.

The new visions and dreams, the healing and being made whole, the saving and the growing of community, does not happen if we only lift up or prioritize the giftings or language or traditions or opinions of one person or group; the new visions and dreams, the healing and being made whole, the saving and the growing of community *happens when we celebrate how we are different and use those different gifts to invite and include more people*. We need each and every language, each and every gift and talent, each and every voice and body and expression of faith, to authentically connect with others and to fully reflect the image of God as a community of faith.

What makes Pentecost *amazing* is simply the fact that people who are expressing such *difference*, are all gathered in the *same* place at the *same* time for the *same* purpose—and in that unified moment—their mission and vision is expanded by how each person uniquely and differently speaks and hears the message and responds. No one is left out. Everyone receives the Spirit in a different way, in a way that speaks to

them, and as a result—the Spirit is able to speak to the world!

Cole Arthur Riley describes Pentecost as “The Sound of Wholeness.” She writes:

“It began with a strong wind. Then something like tongues of fire began to divide and rest on each person gathered. I can’t tell you if they were afraid, if their eyes widened and hearts raced. If they thought to hide, be it from the fire or from one another. But I can tell you that in mystery and all at once, people in the room began to utter tongues unknown to them. An utterance that went out to the multitude, people from every nation, as the sacred sound drew them toward one another. They heard *themselves* in the sound—not the language of their oppressors or people who believed themselves to be closer to the divine than others. They each heard their own language and understood. What words were spoken remain as mysterious as the tongues that bore them. But together, even in the presence of doubt, people from all nations remembered their ancestors. Those who had an imagination for a miracle such as this. The image of God, a sacred multitude, gathered in

the midst of a cosmic power shift.”¹³

In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison tells a parable of language and its capacity to destroy or liberate depending on how we wield it:

*“The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower’s failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet.”*¹⁴

Riley reflects on Morrison’s lecture asking, “Could it be that Pentecost is a paradise remembered on earth?...Two thousand years after the Tower of Babel falls and fifty days

after Christ rises from the dead, we find the story of Pentecost. The Spirit descends upon a sacred diverse gathering, and language is made portal to the divine. A path to God, to one another, and to shared imagination. Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit of God rejects assimilation under the guise of ‘unity.’ This tale is not just about diversity; it’s not mere tokenism; it’s language as liberation. It’s the sound of excluded voices making something whole again...[it’s a collective being born.]”¹⁵

Calvary, as a collective we have a chance to be born anew today. We have so much to celebrate this Pentecost, for we, too, have been speaking in our diverse languages and voices, and we have been listening. Today, on this birthday of the worldwide church, we celebrate a new birth of our own. A new leadership structure, borne out of 15 months of discernment through the work of our Discernment Facilitation Sessions and Ad-hoc Lay Leadership Restructuring Group. Which is to say, we did a whole lot of listening and speaking,

¹³ Cole Arthur Riley, “Pentecost: The Sound of Wholeness,” *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, Penguin Random House LLC, 2024), 264-265.

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Nobel Lecture on December 7, 1993*, accessed on May 19, 2024 at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>.

¹⁵ Riley, *ibid*.

dreaming and drafting, meeting and meeting and meeting again – sometimes over zoom in the evenings, sometimes for an afternoon or morning in the board room, sometimes all day on Saturdays in the youth lounge, and even once for a weekend retreat up in Estes Park. Various leadership groups broke into teams to utilize the gifts of some to work on the big picture, then we utilized the gifts of others to make sense of that big picture in our bylaws. Meanwhile, others kept our congregational insights moving along through the Insight Leadership Team, while another group worked on selecting our first group of Deacons. And all the while, we've worked to listen to your feedback and wisdom and incorporate it – even up until this last week!

Calvary, if you didn't know it, we are a diverse community with lots of experiences and wisdom and thoughts (and a few opinions too), and so for us to truly listen to all voices and be open to how the Spirit is speaking through us all – well that has meant we haven't had much of a choice but to live into our stated value of being an agile, flexible church. We breathe and bend with the Spirit's moving, and YOU, your

voices and thoughts and ideas, YOU are the best embodiment of the Spirit of the Living God. Thank you.

The group of servant leaders, the Deacons, we are voting on today, and the positions we are voting for those people to serve in, reflect how we see the Spirit moving in our midst. It is really is a celebration of Same Different Amazing, just like on that first Pentecost.

What is the *Same*? Well, the key thing that is the Same is our belovedness – each and every one of us is a beloved child of God, created in the image of God. Another key sameness is our mission and vision: “We are a Christlike community that experiences and shares God's love” that is “Open to All, Closed to None.”

It's no accident that our church is made up of each and every one of us, right now, in this moment. You are meant to be here. I am meant to be here. Collectively, God is using us TODAY. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring, but for TODAY we are all here. Together. And the Spirit is moving through us as a people who share a common purpose and faith. In fact, I love that

Pentecost was originally the festival of *Shavuot*, celebrating the harvest and the giving of the Law. Because today, Calvary, we are certainly celebrating the harvest of many months of hard work, and in some ways, we are celebrating a new ‘guiding set of rules’—our bylaws—which we believe honor the way God is calling us to convene and do ministry together in this season of our church’s life. We are gathered with the *Same* purpose in this *Same* place in this *Same* moment and we love the *Same* God.

And yet we are *Different*, aren’t we? Kevin Daugherty from the THRIVE grant was in our congregation a couple weeks ago. And he reported to us that by definition, Calvary is a multi-racial congregation. Meaning, at least 20% of our congregation identifies as non-Euro-American, non-white. And our differences go beyond race and ethnicity. We celebrate and include people of different attractional orientations and gender identities. We celebrate and include people of different ages, from the children on the steps with Minister Angela to the VIPs that are visited by Pastor Mary. We celebrate and include women in all aspects of leadership; (just last week, we

had a guest leave our church before worship even began when he saw that the pastors were women...so yes, women clergy is still a difference that is worth celebrating today!) We celebrate and include people who hold different theologies and political beliefs. Just attend any small group and listen to the discussion and you’ll hear a wide range of beliefs and questions and doubts and convictions.

We celebrate and include people here in the Denver metro-area and around our country! From Alison Matthews driving down from Broomfield, to David Farwig driving up from Castle Rock, to Gordon and Lynda Pelton just a stone’s throw from Calvary – all are welcome. Online worship creates avenues of connection we never dreamed of before. From Nancy Johnson on the west coast in California, to the Kidd-Spences in the middle of the country in Texas, to Christine Zeiler on the East Coast in Baltimore, we are a diverse congregation geographically, and we allow those folks to serve in leadership too!

We are diverse and different in our gifts and skills—from the tech savvy livestream dream

team to the behind-the-scenes envelope-straightening stewards to the voices in the choir, there is room at Calvary for your gifts. And we know that our differences and diversity are what make us *amazing*. And we know that we could be even MORE amazing if we were truly tapping into all of the gifts in our midst and if we were using each and every one of us to tell our Calvary story—which is the story of the Good News—out in the community. We no longer want to be called “the best kept secret in Denver.” We want to be an open, inclusive, healing community where many choose to come because they know we exist and they know they will be welcomed and valued.

So this desire of ours, to create a flexible, agile, structure that allows the Spirit to speak and move through us has led us to *this* day of Pentecost where we are now allowing the Light of God to shine through the Prism of this People we call Calvary, to create a rainbow of ministries that beam into the world.

And I’ll be through when I say this, even our new structure allows us to celebrate our *Same Different Amazing* qualities.

Our Executive Board of Deacons upholds that which is the *Same* about us Calvary, our commonalities. Property, Staff, Finances, Congregational Voice.

Our Property Deacons care for the places where we all gather, both in our physical building and grounds and our technological, cyber spaces too. Our Staff Relations Deacons support our staff members, those who the entire church shares in relationship with, to whom we all relate and listen to for leadership. Our Financial Wellness Deacons who serve in the areas of Secretary/Treasurer (spending) and Stewardship (giving), care for the money we all give, ensuring we are good stewards of our collective resources. And our Co-Moderators represent our congregation as a whole, embodying and upholding our mission, vision, and values—ensuring that which we have all agreed upon, that which is the foundation of who we are remains the center and core of who we are.

And then our Ministry Advisory Board begins to pull in the Deacons that highlight our differences, in order to celebrate and honor them. Connecting Gifts with Needs is a new area

of focus for us, as these Deacons will ensure that the diversity of gifts in our midst is utilized. We have so much untapped potential, and we want everyone's gifts and talents to be used in ways that meet the diverse and varied needs of our ministries. Which leads to our Formation and Engagement Deacons. These Deacons serve to support all of the ministries of our church that makes us who we are—the many ways that we love God and love others and care for one another. Ministries of justice and advocacy, service and learning, music and worship, kids, youth, adults and spiritual formation for all ages.

And then what makes us Amazing? Well, ALL of that, and the fact that we have two Vision and Discernment Deacons whose job it is to keep us listening and learning always. Listening to the movement of the Spirit as we hear it through the voices of one another, through the voices in our community and city, and collectively then, through the voice of God. Where do we need to adjust or tweak something? Where do we need a new direction? Where do we need to keep doing what we're doing? And, how are we telling our *Amazing* Story to the world?

All of these areas work together, Calvary, to emphasize our collective power and voice as a congregation that is made up of many individual voices that each reflect the image of God.

Just as the different languages spoken on Pentecost worked to create a common experience of the Spirit being seen and heard and therefore everyone being included, resulting in amazing community building and collective action for healing and wholeness—Calvary, how will your voice, the language you speak today, translate to someone's ear who is looking for a community to belong, a place to call home, a church where healing can happen and faith can grow? How will our collective Spirit-infused voices ignite movements for change in our city, creating more equity and inclusion, more hope and welcome?

Who we are and how we do the business and ministry of church matters. It is precisely how the Spirit moves through us—Colorado Nonprofit Statutes and all. The Spirit is moving to speak a new word. Are we listening? And are we letting our tongues loosen to be the ones who speak? We all have

something to say...some word to say, some gift to offer, some way to serve. And as you speak, give, and serve through this place, God will use it to create healing and hope and change. Voice by voice, gift by gift, person by person, action by action, community by community...the Spirit of the Living God is falling fresh—and fiery—upon us all.

THAT is pretty *amazing*!

Calvary, how do you see our *Same Different Amazing* showing up in the world and in your life this Pentecost? And what does it mean?

Because how we experience God's *Amazing*, and how we find the meaning in it all, will make all the difference in what visions we see and what dreams we dream.

Professor Michal Beth Dinkler calls Pentecost the new community's Opening Day.¹⁶ All the players are there and they have everything they need, all the skills and gifts and opportunities—it's up to them to follow the Spirit and see how the season will play out. They

just have to keep at it and stay in the game.

Calvary, we are *Same Different Amazing* and it's our Opening Day. What will this season bring us? Or better yet, what will *you* bring to this season?

Amen.

¹⁶ Michal Beth Dinkler, "Commentary on Acts 2:1-21," *Working Preacher* (19 May 2024), accessed on May 19, 2024 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost-2/commentary-on-acts-21-21-17>.