SERMON — ST. ANDREW'S, KITCHENER — JUNE 8, 2025

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, 25-27

As a young adult I graduated from the University of Waterloo, from the faculty of Arts with a degree in Religious Studies. Deep down I knew that there was a sense of being called toward exploring ordination, but there would be years of pushing-and-pulling, and avoidance, and distraction with that. Something like what St. Augustine wrote in his famous autobiography: "O Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!" Even though my degree said "honours" after it, and even though I'd been top of my class for at least some of my years of study, finding a job with an arts degree is not a the most linear of paths. So thank goodness I am quite skilled with the lawn mower, because that's what I did for part of that time after university.

Eventually I got a retail job with a small local chain that bought and sold used CDs and movies; I was, and still am, one of their more loyal customers. Though an improvement on lawn mowing (and with a staff discount), it was discouraging only getting part-time hours. But it didn't take too long to get an assistant manager role, and not long after that, to be moved to another store, where I'd serve as manager for about seven years.

Working in retail, like in any job working with people, there is no shortage of difficult, frustrating interactions with 'the public.' And for our purposes, in light of the Pentecost reading, I found one memory, deep in the back of my head, rise to the surface. There's not much to it, but it had to

do with someone who sold a bag of items to us. And as you might know, stores like this give more value if the seller takes store credit (it moves more product and keeps money within the system); in our case it was 40%. So if your items are valued at $100 cash, you'd get $140 in store credit instead, if you were open to that. Try as I might to explain this to this customer, she looked at me with what's called a 'stink eye.' It sounded like I was using some strange calculation or loop hole to cheat her out of the money that she deserved, is what she was thinking. I pointed to our signage that laid out the process, I grabbed scrap paper to do math calculations of all the possible scenarios, but no matter what, I couldn't get the message across. In her own words: *"you're just digging yourself deeper into a hole..."* How frustrating it was, that no matter how many words I said, I could not be understood. *"Keep on digging,"* she'd say. The objectivity of mathematics didn't resolve things. The authority of the store signage, or the business' many years of operation didn't help. There was probably some deeper, human issue that kept us from getting on the same page: a fundamental distrust. Or nervousness at being in this new place, with unfamiliar people, and assumptions about the subculture of people who congregated there. There are some life situations in which we wish we could just explain our way out of conflict or disorder. Sometimes that's appropriate, and sometimes it even works. There are other times when it does not.

The famous Pentecost story from The Acts of the Apostles is about the overcoming of human division, by being able to understand one

another. Though it's accomplished not through the eloquence of testimony (a form of explanation, one person, or group, or culture to another). Instead, it's a gift from God. It's nothing less than the Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation, and breathed life into the body made out of the dust of the earth. From chaos to order, and from nothingness to animated life, this all tells us something about the character and ways of God.

In our Genesis reading, long before the existence of CDs and DVDs to buy and sell for cash or store credit, we learn about some mythological era in which, we're told, the whole earth shared the same language and words. They say: *"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."*

They want to make a name for themselves. The first of the 'seven deadly sins' is pride, and here we're maybe seeing it play out in front of us. But there's more than that happening here. *"let us build... a tower with its top in the heavens."* Yes, the Empire State Building, the CN Tower, or whatever that massive skyscraper in Dubai is called, will get you noticed, and bring fame and wonder. But coming, as this reading does, on the heels of the giant flood, are we meant to hold these two narratives up against each other? The flood, we were told, covered the face of the earth, covering even mountain peaks. And here we are, having turned, the page and people are talking about building a tower to reach up to the heavens. I'm not hearing so much "let's make a name for ourselves" in the Hollywood sense, so

much as *"I don't want my name — my line, and my life — to be erased, obliterated, from the face of the earth."* This is a community that is developing, and growing, and their survival instincts and their fear and trauma response is to hedge their bets; to do whatever they can to eek out an existence; to secure their future. Think of what groups can be like in times of fear: they enforce norms and rules, they jettison the misfits, they demonize the 'others.'

What ends up happening in our story is that God appears not to be interested in playing by their rules of fear. On one level God may appear temperamental and capricious; sabotaging the human community. But in confusing their language, God is providing an opportunity. An opportunity for the blossoming of diverse human cultures. The challenge but also the beauty of people collaborating: transcending difference and division. And the miracle of that first post-Resurrection Pentecost is not that differences and divisions are eliminated. Because they're not (and the multicultural makeup of the Church across the globe in our own day is a testament to this). No, the miracle of Pentecost is that people are able to understand each other. Even with difference. Even with divisions. Even with distinctness: everyone was understood.

And as we turn that page, we'll find a missionary saga that is exciting and fruitful. But there's also no shortage of challenges, twists and turns, and conflicts. A new and influential leader, Saul, later changed to Paul, struggled to get on with the existing leadership. And everyone else — the

everyday ordinary Jesus-followers — how do you think they felt, at least initially, being told that this new church-planter and encourager was someone who'd been actively involved in hunting them down, just months or years earlier; directly implicated in the persecution and even deaths of your friends or relatives. And yet this is the community that God, in Christ, chose. And equipped and empowered.

There may be lessons for us, in this particular moment of our congregational story, as we (or you) prepare to turn the page in coming months. It's understandable for there to be fears, even fears informed by previous experiences, previous 'floods.' But the calling is not to build upward out of fear, but to continue to grow in the diverse, sometimes haphazard ways that we already are. In times of fear and change, there can be temptations to be guided by that fear (or our self-protective responses to it), or to lose hope, or give up. But that's not inevitable, and it certainly doesn't have to be the story with this community, which has experienced floods (of a sort), and fire in its history. We already contain within us the seeds of the diverse community seen at that first Christian Pentecost. And we have already been given that Spirit of life, unity, and peace that Jesus promised to his followers.

Jesus said, as we heard in the Gospel: *"Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."*

And more than that, the gift of Pentecost is not noise and chaos and disorder, but peace. I know it can be hard to imagine peace in times of change and uncertainty. But, if the message of the Cross has anything to say to us, it is that Divine action doesn't just come in tranquil, easy, predictable times. No, it comes to, and with us, as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Again, from our Gospel: *"the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*