You may have noticed that throughout human history humanity has co-opted many things: historical events, music, books, art and even, yes, even the Bible for our own purposes. Pentecost is such an event. This festival which occurs 50 days after Easter, is considered by many Christians to be the birth of the Christian Church. However, when it first began it was in fact a Jewish festival occurring 50 days after Passover. It’s interesting to me that Christians so often do this: co-op religious holidays etc…and give it significance that suits their purposes, we as people in general do this because it makes the event we are marking exclusive to a certain group of people. In the case of Pentecost, it ignores the whole Jewish tradition, which means it ignores the tradition of Jesus. We Christians do this all the time, and it is striking on this day in particular how antithetical it is to the way God works. Today we hear in the reading from Acts about how the Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire on Jewish people from every nation, people who spoke in many different languages. Despite their language differences these disciples are able to understand one another because of the working of the Holy Spirit in their midst, filling the entire house with her presence .

When I think of how we treat people who speak languages other than English in this country and how few of us actually bother to learn a second language to communicate with someone from another culture; it makes it clear how unusual this event must have been. It can be freeing to think and communicate in another language, to people that would be otherwise unknownable to you. My eldest child, Katelyn has been taking American Sign Language for several months and for a person with communication limitations this has been a gift for them. They seem to find it much easier to sign then to speak much of the time. Now if only the Holy Spirit would help me to interpret! It may be an avenue for them to connect with those in the non-hearing world that they previously did not have. It has already enabled Katelyn to communicate with me more.

The Holy Spirit which Jesus sends as our advocate in his stead, is a unifying spirit. It is a wise mother that wants to keep the human family together and remind us of how we are connected, not different. She is wisdom itself. We can understand one another because we are not only all part of the human family but we are part of the family of God, created, and loved by this amazing Advocate that Jesus sends to us when he knows he has to leave this world for a long time. As we have seen, the past several years in this country alone, there are large swathes of people who feel forgotten, neglected and alone. Many of these people live in rural areas like Brown County and have experienced massive loss of jobs. This has occurred for many reasons. The closing of coal mines, the rise of the corporate farms, the closing of factories which have moved overseas where costs are cheaper. The past year the pandemic has forced some businesses to close and all businesses and non-profits to rethink and change how they do their jobs. Today is only our second Sunday back at church so we know about these changes first- hand. There are of course ways some of these changes in the job market could have been done differently. Ways that were more compassionate and less money oriented. As we hopefully begin to shift from industry such as coal mines to greener methods of providing energy how can we bring those out of work coal miners into a new industry? As a society we haven’t proven to be very good at being Advocates for one another, especially if we feel threatened by the thought of sharing our own security. Last week I listened to a podcast about weird Al Yancovick. The man interviewing Yankovich, identified with Weird Al when he himself was a child, because he felt like such an outcast growing up. He never fit in, his family moved a lot, he still wet the bed when he was 9. Weird Al was someone who didn’t fit any cultural norms either. He spent most of his life alone, without many friends, and he has an unusual appearance, which he has cultivated and accentuated over time. Weird Al’s time spent alone as a child and introvert became a time he used to find music to parody, finding the perfect rhyme and theme to go with well -known pop songs. I remember knowing friends growing up that thought he was great. Now I know why. He is an advocate of sorts. He shows us that we don’t have to be “cool”, dress “cool” or look “cool” to be just fine in this world. The problem as Paul tells us in Romans is that it’s painful to be different, to start a new thing, to transform hatred, despair, and sadness into affirming, breathing, life-giving, joyous ways of being in this world. One of the areas of exclusion in this society is the brutality against black men. If you read the Indy Star Thursday or saw the news reports, you may have heard the story of Ronald Green. A man who was brutally beaten and tazed by police after getting in a car crash and died on the way to the hospital. The tapes just released from two years ago are painful to watch. Ronald understood something these police officers forgot; at one point he said to the police officers “I’m your brother, I’m scared, I’m scared”. This unjustified and inhumane treatment against blacks is deeply ingrained in America. Who will be the advocate to see that we repair the breach against are African American brothers and sisters? There are so many deeply embedded sins in our culture that point us away from following Jesus and so few telling us that we are all included in those tongues of fire, that we are all included in that room with the Holy Spirit. The Advocate is for us and for our neighbors too. By sending the Holy Spirit to us after Jesus had to leave after his death, resurrection and ascension, he lets us know that we can still work together with God in real time. God does not give up on humanity. The continuity is clear. The fact that the celebration came from the Jewish Festival of Passover, to the Christian Tradition and remains with us today, reminds us that our Advocate is close by. Paul describes the pain of changing our ways as being much like labor pains. Transformation and change can be painful, but it can also be life giving and life renewing. Giving birth to a new life, to new ways of reaching out to our communities shows us that we believe in the potential and the hope that new life and connections can bring. These words of Jan Richardson speak to the pains of opening ourselves to this Advocate:

THIS GRACE THAT SCORCHES US  
A Blessing for Pentecost Day  
  
Here’s one thing  
you must understand  
about this blessing:  
it is not  
for you alone.  
  
It is stubborn  
about this.  
Do not even try  
to lay hold of it  
if you are by yourself,  
thinking you can carry it  
on your own.  
  
To bear this blessing,  
you must first take yourself  
to a place where everyone  
does not look like you  
or think like you,  
a place where they do not  
believe precisely as you believe,  
where their thoughts  
and ideas and gestures  
are not exact echoes  
of your own.  
  
Bring your sorrow.  
Bring your grief.  
Bring your fear.  
Bring your weariness,  
your pain,  
your disgust at how broken  
the world is,  
how fractured,  
how fragmented  
by its fighting,  
its wars,  
its hungers,  
its penchant for power,  
its ceaseless repetition  
of the history it refuses  
to rise above.  
  
I will not tell you  
this blessing will fix all that.  
  
But in the place  
where you have gathered,  
wait.  
Watch.  
Listen.  
Lay aside your inability  
to be surprised,  
your resistance to what you  
do not understand.  
  
See then whether this blessing  
turns to flame on your tongue,  
sets you to speaking  
what you cannot fathom  
  
or opens your ear  
to a language  
beyond your imagining  
that comes as a knowing  
in your bones,  
a clarity  
in your heart  
that tells you  
  
this is the reason  
we were made:  
for this ache  
that finally opens us,  
  
for this struggle,  
this grace  
that scorches us  
toward one another  
and into  
the blazing day.