



First United Church of Oak Park

Great and Glorious Day

Acts 2: 17-20

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

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There was a time in high school when three of my four classes for the semester were languages. I had English, Spanish, and German. I happened to have Spanish and German in the same room with the same teacher, which led to a little bit of confusion now and then. It can be disorienting to learn a new language. Many times a day I asked myself ... Hablamos Espanol? Sprechen wir Deutsch? Or can we just muddle through English right now? I can remember my teacher responding to an accidentally muddled multi-lingual sentence with, "Lydia, that wasn't German, that was Espanddeutschish." I am reminded of the occasional hilarity and confusion of those days right now as life shifts quite drastically and requires me to learn a new way of doing life. We are all metaphorically learning a new language ... or three ... and clumsily trying to speak in a way that makes sense in this new world around us.

As clumsy, confusing, and heartbreaking as this time can be, I also feel full of hope right now. I'm inspired that people who do not normally have access to our community are suddenly receiving our messages in a format that works for them ... that speaks their language, you might say. People who are homebound because of illness or age and can't come to 848 Lake Street; queer folks who have experienced religious trauma and are not ready to show up in a big, intimidating sanctuary; folks with social anxiety; folks who are in isolated areas where there aren't progressive churches that affirm them — because of this format can connect with a community that loves them just as they are. We are learning to speak a new language, metaphorically speaking. The language of some of the folks on the margins. I wonder if there's a little glimmer of a vision for the future forming there.

After the day of Pentecost, the disciples were changed forever. They now understood what it meant to meet people where they are and offer them what they need in a way they can receive it. I wonder if this time is changing us forever

in some ways. I admit there are things from before this pandemic that I long to return to, and I'm ready for this to be over and to see your beautiful faces. But what of this strange time is worth carrying with us into our future? What visions are we having that will shape our new reality? Are we learning a new language that we can speak into the future?

When all this speaking new languages is happening, Peter quotes the Hebrew Bible, saying, "In the last days ... your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your men see visions ..." I wonder about those last days sometimes.

Would you humor me and do a little time traveling with me for a moment? In her book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle takes us on a journey back in time to what I would dare to call a series of "last days." First to about 500 years ago, the Reformation of about 1517. Some of you may remember our celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation here at First United with a study group and with a Reformation fair in the lounge. Maybe you took a picture in the photo booth wearing a funny Martin Luther mask or maybe you have hung onto that lavender sachet to ward off the plague — if only they were right about that lavender preventing disease part. The Reformation was a huge shift that came about because of the convergence of tons of cultural influences: the rise of humanism and hints of capitalism, the invention of the printing press, a plague, and so much more — they all resulted in a cataclysmic change. It was the end times for the old structure of the church, and Luther and others emerged with new visions for new practices and a new language. So there's our first bit of time travel: 500 years ago — what do we find? End times ... a vision ... and then a new great and glorious day emerges.

Then Tickle takes us back another 500 hundred years to the 11th century. There were wars between the east and west, and the politics and religion of the east and west split. It was the end times for many ways of being. Christianity experienced the great Schism, but a vision emerged of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches we know today and they found a new way forward. 1,000 years ago — what do we find? End times ... a vision ... and a new great and glorious day emerges.

500 years before that, we can see the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages. Civilization faltered in what must have felt deeply like the end times for so much of life as folks had known it. Monastics saw a vision of how they could be the keepers of literacy for civilization writ large and the role of

the church changed. 1,500 years ago — and what do we find? End times ... a vision ... and a new great and glorious day emerges.

Of course, 500 years before that, there was a shift so huge it's hard to imagine. The emergence of the Common Era. As the Romans ruled without mercy over so much of the world, ending other cultures and traditions, from within an oppressed group, the Jewish people, a movement for justice and peace emerges. The day of Pentecost is one of the great markers of this shift. The followers in this movement let go of their hopes for what they thought should have been — Jesus overthrowing the Romans — and they saw a new vision of what could be: each ordinary person strengthened by the spirit to speak confidently into their new reality. 2,000 years ago — and what do we find? End times ... a vision ... and a new great and glorious day emerges.

Every time we go back 500 years, we find end times, a vision, and a new great and glorious day emerges. So, friends, here we are 500 years later, and it makes me a little nervous to even say it, but I think it might be time. Do you feel that shift like I do? Do you get the sense that the world may never be the same again? Do you get the sense that we may be learning a new way of being the church — that we're learning a whole new language?

First United is associated with two denominations that can trace their roots back to that shift that happened 500 years ago. In the founding document of one of our denominations it says, "The United Church of Christ affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own ..."

This is a moment for our generation to take responsibility for making this faith our own. End times are for seeing visions and prophesying and speaking new languages and not being tied to the same old, same old. So whose language are we called to learn to speak in order to live into the great and glorious future God holds before us like a vision from heaven?

On the day of Pentecost, people heard someone they previously could not understand now speaking their language. And Peter quotes,

"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams ..."

But he reminds us of what comes first:

“The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.”

Friends, I know it has felt like the sun turning to darkness and moon to blood for many of us lately. End times are challenging. There will be grief. There will be uncertainty. There may be moments of confusion along the way, and as we learn whatever new language we’re going to need to meet people where they are in this new day. We may find ourselves accidentally speaking a little Espandeutschish at times, but we will get there. When it’s time, let’s go out into the streets like the disciples, filled with the Spirit, speaking the new languages she’s taught us that will make it possible for those on the margins to understand. From the end times must come the time of visioning — and then — then there *will* come yet another great and glorious day, I *have* to believe that. Better yet, the spirit *promises* it — *and* the spirit promises to guide us there herself! With that assurance resting deep within our souls, I *know* we will see a new great and glorious day when we emerge on the other side of this. Thanks be to God!