

“Spirit-Filled”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 31, 2020

Pentecost Sunday

Romans 8:22-27

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 2:1-4

On that first Pentecost, there was chaos in the streets: people gathered from all corners of the ancient world for the Festival of Weeks; pilgrims who had travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the gift of the Torah on Mt. Sinai; Jews from many countries and cultures descended upon the holy city to commemorate the end of the Passover.

On this Pentecost, nearly 2000 years later, there is also chaos in many city streets. They are quieter this morning than they were last night – and for several nights prior – but we know that this might only be a temporary respite. Around the country, we have been witnessing a combination of peaceful protests and violent confrontations; lawless rioters in some places and heavily armed police forces in others; and sometimes tense confrontations between the two.

For Christians, Pentecost represents the coming of the Holy Spirit as something like fire, empowering the disciples to share the good news of Christ’s love to people of every place, using a language that they could each understand. All of God’s children were given an opportunity to hear; no-one was left out. Thus, the church as we imagine and understand it – a unified body which is known by and for its diversity – was born.

Lately, there have been a lot of conversations circulating about ‘those people.’ ‘Those people’ represent different groups in our country that are not like us. They are angry, biased and disrespectful; they just don’t get it. As a society, we have become divided in our conversations, actions and thoughts about who are ‘those people’ and who are ‘people like us.’ Those who are not in our tribe are increasingly vilified, condemned and abused. What is the church’s role in the midst of it all? What is the message of good news of God’s love that we have to share? What does that good news sound like – and look like – in today’s volatile situation?

You could say that on that first Pentecost in Jerusalem, there were a lot of ‘those people’ that had packed the streets. The first gift God gave to the disciples to do the work of the church was the ability to speak the languages of people of widely different cultures and backgrounds. When the disciples could speak the language of ‘those people’ they could hear about life from their point of view; they could speak to them words of the healing, comfort, reconciliation, hope and love that Jesus embodies. The gift of that first Pentecost was to open up communication between people who had been separated by different languages and cultural misunderstandings. This gift removed preconceptions of ‘those people’ versus ‘people like us.’ Because, in God’s kingdom, there is no hierarchy of us and them. In God’s kingdom, we are all beloved children.¹

We are living in a time of fundamental breakdown in our country of communication and understanding between predominantly white communities and communities of color. We are speaking different languages. But, of course, this is nothing new; that is the problem. In 1964, Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer famously said, “all my life I’ve been sick and tired. Now, I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.” That was more than 55 years ago. Around the same time, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was trying to speak the language of the experience of the African American community to the rest of America. As riots erupted out of protests then, too, he denounced them as the criminal behavior that they were. We, too, must call criminal behavior what it is. But, we can’t stop there and dehumanize ‘those people’ who are bringing chaos to the streets. In a speech that Dr. King gave in 1967, he said: “I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.”

But Rev. William Barber, co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, points us also to Dr. King’s words delivered in a eulogy at the funeral of James Reed – a white man who came to Selma, Alabama to work for voting rights but was murdered by racist violence in 1965. Dr. King said it is not enough to ask who killed the victim in a case like that – or a case like the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The question of who did the killing is not all that justice demands, but also what killed him?²

¹ Rachel Simonson, “Pentecost”

² Rev. William Barber, “America must listen to its wounds. They will tell us where to look for hope” in *The Guardian*

America has failed to hear the voices of communities of color calling out for justice – especially in the midst of not one, but a series of horrific, racially motivated killings. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society have been more concerned with tranquility, order and the status quo than about justice, equality, and human rights for all. And so, in some real sense, this summer’s riots have been caused by our nation’s many winters of delay. As long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence over and over again. Injustice and inaction are the ‘what’ that has been doing the killing.

If the gift of Pentecost is to open language barriers in order to listen and better understand each other and offer the good news of the love, healing and hope of Jesus Christ, then we have to start learning the language of the unheard. We need to be open to really hearing the generations of pain that has caused this kind of unrest. We need to really listen to people as they talk about what it is like to struggle finding housing and employment in a racist society; what it is like to fear that boys will grow to become men who are often seen as a threat just because of the color of their skin. We need to hear what it is like to look around and see no hope for change: only a life of fear, frustration, and injustice. Not because life is hard, like how the rest of us experience life at times, but solely because of racial inequality. How do we really listen so that we become as outraged by the destruction of people as we are by the destruction of property? As Elizabeth Eaton, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has said: “until a white majority feels so deeply in our soul that the pain of black and brown people is our pain, it will continue to be dangerous to be black or brown in America.”³

This Pentecost, we are being invited to learn a new language so that we might really hear in our hearts the pain of our neighbors who are far-too-often seen as ‘those people.’ And when, by the power of the Holy Spirit that descends upon us, we are so affected by what we hear, then we will begin to understand how to create healing and new life. We can start to become the hands and feet of Jesus himself; for, as he proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry in Luke’s gospel: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (4:18-19)

³ As quoted by Rachel Simonson, “Pentecost”

The gift of the Holy Spirit empowers us. As Christians, we are guided by God's Spirit to love deeply with ears that hear the pain of our neighbors; to stand with and uphold the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed; to live life differently and not be swept up in the hate and divisions of a broken society, and instead be guided by love and openness. As Spirit-filled people, God invites us to live differently; to be bearers of Christ's compassionate healing of bodies, minds, and communities.

This Pentecost Sunday, let us pray that peace might replace the violence we have been seeing; but also that justice might replace the injustices that have been with us too long. Let us pray that the dividing walls of culture and language that have been standing for too long may be brought down as we are given the will and ability to truly listen to one another's fear and pain. And may we draw closer to God's vision of growing ever more unified in and through our diversity. Filled with the Spirit, may we become the hands and feet of Jesus with a message of justice, hope and love. Amen.