

Sermon Pentecost 5.31.20
Acts 2:1-21
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Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ '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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Sermon

Please join me in a spirit of prayer: O God, our God, words are incomplete. And we must not be silent. Guide us to confess our complicity. Give us open and curious hearts. Be among us here and now. And may these words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

My friends, we have spent some time this week talking about the sickness that is plaguing our world. It has brought so much death. It is something to which we are all vulnerable. I've listened to professionals in this field talking about it. It's all over the local and national news. People everywhere are talking about it. Our Governor and local leaders have talked about it, lamented it, named it. Of course, I could be talking about the Covid-19 pandemic, but that is not the sickness I'm thinking of. And the bad news is that we are likely all infected with it. I'm talking about racism.

We have seen guttural cries for justice, and protests this week following the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. We have seen flames burning down buildings in Minneapolis and St. Paul. One of my colleagues who walked the areas that were burned recently said that the fires and the [simmering rage] "feels a little like the... burning down [of] our apathy, [the burning down of] complacency and [the burning down of] status-quo contentment, to make space for a new way that honors the dignity" of black lives.¹ Fires are chaotic. They are unpredictable. And fires really good at getting our attention. Flames and burning alert us to something important.

The same is true with fire throughout the Bible. Fire gets Moses' attention when God appears as a burning bush. God leads the people out of slavery in Egypt, lighting the way in the night as a pillar of fire. Isaiah's poetry references a refiner's fire, as in refining metal to burn away impurities. God makes a covenant with Abram and appears as a fire in Genesis. Flames, fire, and burning are used again and again in scripture. Today we often talk about fire when we talk about rage. But fire in scripture is also a sign of God's presence. A sign of righteous anger. A sign of holiness, even a way-maker for justice.

This morning, I could tell you the history of Pentecost, but I don't think it's helpful to get into that today. For now, let's just say that on the day of Pentecost something big happened. Something holy, something firey, something that transcended the ordinary. And not everyone agreed about what it meant nor how to respond to it. Some people said they're out of their minds, they're drunk. And others thought that God's spirit was being poured out among the people—a fulfillment of scripture—where the children prophesy, the young have visions and the old dream dreams.

In the Pentecost story depicted today, people gathered in Jerusalem from different towns and lands, bringing with them their diverse particularities: their unique experiences, their cultural identities, their differing languages. And they are all there, when the Holy Spirit arrives in "tongues of fire." All of these people who don't know one another, who have a lot of dissimilarities, and don't even speak the same language, are affected by it. They are drawn together by the Holy Spirit in community. And as we heard, and demonstrated, there they are, all speaking different languages, but each understanding in their own language.

As one of my seminary professors, Matt Skinner, says: in Acts, the Spirit comes for all people. It is an experience that draws together people who don't speak the same language—and aren't required to. Their particularities, their differences are embraced. All of them are swept together, by the Holy Spirit. This arrival of God's presence among the people, Skinner says, can be summed up in one phrase: "everything is different for everyone."²

¹ Rev. Corrine Freedman Ellis, Facebook post, May 28, 2020.

² Matt Skinner, *Acts, Catching Up with the Spirit*, Abingdon, 2020, p 29-32.

Everything is different. For everyone at Pentecost. I don't presume to know exactly what's happening in our state and our communities, or what it all means yet. But what I do know, is that something big is happening. It's outside of ordinary life. And we can feel it. Yet again a black person has died senselessly. Yet again, a black person was killed with impunity. The Twin Cities are burning. According to MPR, some fires were lit by protesters, and plenty were lit by agitators, including white supremacists, bent on preventing people from living in a more reformed, just society.

Our siblings who are black, indigenous, people of color, white allies—all—are asking the world to stop, watch, listen, and to stand in solidarity with them for justice. I hope everything is different for everyone not just at Pentecost but in this moment, too. Because its time. The demeaning, disempowering, discriminatory acts, oppressive systems, and killing of black bodies is an embedded history in our nation. And it is time to change.

So if you feel it too, if you are following the events unfolding up highway 35, perhaps everything is different for everyone *because*, we are each, we are *all*, being ignited with the fire of the Holy Spirit to do some actual work to dismantle racism. In ourselves, and in the systems in society which we live and from which we who are white, benefit.

Let's do the work in our own lives about how those of us who are white have benefitted (and do benefit) from systems of oppression. Let's brush up on how, in the name of God, our ancestors built systems on the backs of black, indigenous, people of color. Let's see the ways in which we have perpetuated racism in the world. As one pastor at a Missionary Baptist church suggested the other night, perhaps the cries for justice for George Floyd, Arnaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and so. Many. More. are kindling cries of the Holy Spirit, moving us to change. Maybe it feels like everything is different this time because this is the time where we confess our own complicity and co-create a more just way of being. Now, like I mentioned, we are also in a pandemic. Perhaps this is the time for us all to work to prepare for the better world we hope to step into when the pandemic is over.

Maybe this is our moment of Pentecost, where the violence and the cries for justice and the Holy Spirit are finally moving us to change. To seek out the voices of black, brown, indigenous, people of color who have been stifled, brought down, devalued, dehumanized and killed for hundreds of years. Perhaps this is the time the Holy Spirit is urging those of us with power in society, to decenter ourselves from the story. To be quiet and listen—really listen without the intention to respond—and learn. To support the black and brown authors, activists, bloggers and podcasters and educators who are doing the work. Until we are willing to change within ourselves, until we are willing to see the ways in which white people benefit and are perpetrators in systems of injustice, things won't change. But maybe, by listening and learning, we will be lit up to stand in solidarity and advocacy, and use our positions of power to amplify (not speak for!) the voices of those who have been ignored and denied for so long.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who is remembered so fondly by our nation, but was considered radical by too many in his time, spoke these words you have no doubt seen all over social media by now. Dr. King spoke them over 50 years ago: "I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ...It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity. And so in a real sense, our nations' summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of

having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”

May this be the time when we can be united by the movement Spirit in a community of faith that calls for the humanity of black lives. May this be the time when we are each refined by the burning down [of] our apathy, complacency and status-quo contentment.” May this be the time that we stop talking, and listen, and pay attention to black brown indigenous voices. That we may hear, that we may be changed. That the Holy Spirit may spark us to move beyond hearing to action. May it be so, that from this Pentecost, everything may indeed be different. For everyone. Amen.