

Pentecost 2020
Acts 2:1-21 and I Corinthians 12:3b-13, 21-22
May 31, 2020
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Any pilgrim who came to Jerusalem for Pentecost traveled from their hometown to a crowded, holy city, crossing the threshold from ordinary days into sacred, festival ones, for what was known as an annual affirmation of God's faithfulness. But on the morning recorded in Acts, the wind blew, not with a Mediterranean breeze but with a divine gust, strong enough to make noise, its whoosh heard as the shutters rattled and the doors flew open. Then newcomers appeared on the city streets, persons who, despite the commonality of their Galilean appearance, each spoke a different dialect, the words tumbling out of their mouths with such power that it appeared their tongues were aflame with the spark of God's very life. The languages were diverse but the message was the same: God has walked the earth, ministering to the meek, confronting the world's evil, God's very life amid our life, and even death could not hold him. Those who received the message were born into its power; a life renewed and guided by the Spirit of God.

Could that Pentecost morning feel any farther away than the realities of today? Those streets were crowded; ours are nearly empty. Then travelers journeyed a distance for a celebration. We largely don't leave our homes. They worshiped around the temple, able to mark the difference, between ordinary and sacred time. We ask, "What day is it?" Every day seems the same as the one just past. Theologically, Pentecost is about power; pouring out of God's power through the Spirit to make us bold prophets, courageous evangelists, those who know God has unleashed a new thing and we will act with that newness. Yet, this morning, we are more locked in than poured out; more sorrowful than hopeful, less confident than attentive to all the things we cannot control. Seeing those strange Galileans, some in the crowd sneered "They have filled their bellies with wine. "Pentecost might have been powerful, then, we might scoff. Where is God's Spirit now?

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, with its fire, speech, and drama – while unique – is not the only movement of the Spirit in scripture. Spirit hovered over the unformed chaos at creation, speaking to bring light. God's voice came earlier in flames, those of the burning bush drawing Moses' attention. The Spirit spoke to a terrified prophet hiding out in a cave, coming this time not in wind, fire, or the thunder but in silence, the certainty of what he must do washing over Elijah. I will not leave you alone, Jesus promised his disciples, who worried about being orphans in a failed future. The Spirit will comfort you, guide you, be an Advocate for your life. In the gap between past Pentecosts and our present situation, between bold possibility and bowed down heads, the Spirit still moves. I want today, Pentecost 2020, to name a few Spirit-filled moments.

The first gift of the Spirit for the disciples was the gift of courage. The Holy Spirit made them brave. Initially when Jesus ascended, they stay locked in a room, trapped in the same posture as when Jesus was resurrected. It's a familiar pattern – there is a crisis about the future and the

disciples go into hiding. The Spirit pushes them beyond their hidden lives, out from their locked up, fearful spaces into unfamiliar ones, to not cower but to embrace their future. What has been a place of despair and indecision because a moment of courage. This shift from fearful to bold, from directionless to purposeful is not of the disciples' making; it is the power of the Spirit.

One of the hard truths emerging over the past weeks is that the pandemic will not end quickly, nor will our lives easily revert to "normal." What we thought would be weeks has turned into months has turned into seasons. While the physical analogy of moving from locked room onto crowded streets does not fit the challenges of living largely at home, we have been forced beyond our comfortable confines and familiar routines into spaces where we have to be creative about how we manage the days, attend to our souls, and nurture our relationships. The Spirit moves into this space, into our lives, to make a new path, to remind us our lives are never devoid of God's purposefulness. That we, too, can face the future with courage, confident in God's purpose-filled love making a path.

A second gift of the Spirit is how strangers are formed into a community. At Pentecost, a bunch of fractured, frightened disciples are combined with unsuspecting but hungry-for-God strangers and what is born? The body of Christ, the Church, a mystical communion so much greater than us. Do you get how unlikely this is? This community is not born from the skill of the leaders, the brilliance of the disciples, or the enthusiasm of the newly baptized . . . it is the work of God.

Would you not agree that these long weeks of being physically separated, unable to come together physically as a community, particularly in our sanctuary, has had the effect of heightening our hunger and gratitude for our community? Don't you cherish the spaces where we rest in the miracle of God bringing us all together - as faces show up on screens, voices we love come across telephone wires? I sense the Spirit at work whenever we gather in Zoom meetings, showing up in the prayers requested, the smiles of recognition at another's face, the tenderness in how we treat each other. The Spirit shows up in the peace that is exchanged across Facebook comments or the exclamations of recognition when beloved faces read scripture. The first Pentecost was about largeness of the Spirit – converting 3,000 new believers – but right now, today, I see the Spirit working in smaller places, with no less power – as bodies of Christ pray, meet, love one another – and I believe the Spirit working to form us into deeply connected, more faithful body.

Finally, the Pentecost miracle rested upon a diversity of language. The disciples were given the gift of speaking new tongues. Not only did unfamiliar phrases leave their lips but others, ethnically different from them, understood their message. The Apostle Paul picks up this unity in diversity characteristic of the Spirit in his words to the Corinthian church. There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, varieties of services, but the same Lord. It is a mystical dance of being many but one, diverse yet unified, all members of Christ's body.

Except, the harsh headlines of our world speak a different message: about the evils perpetrated across history at some of God's gloriously diverse body, treating them as less than human. The

pandemic, while random in its lethality, has not been an equalizing experience. The elderly, persons of color, and the working poor have suffered more its effects. Two weeks ago, many of us ran for Ahmaud Arbery, this morning we weep also for George Floyd.

When I was pulling together the worship elements for today's service, I added additional verses to our Corinthian reading; inserting the last two verses which speak of how those parts of the body classified as weaker are actually indispensable. How if one part of the body suffers, then every part suffers with it.

When I did the planning, I thought these final verses were part of the lectionary assigned for today. When I went back to check as I started writing the sermon, they were not. I think the Spirit inserted them, because when members of Christ's body are suffering, then we all are weeping together, because I believe the pervasive sin of racism is a sin we, at Grace Church, are being called to confront, with courage, deep connection of community and the mysteriously transforming power of God that the Spirit gives to us in order that we might act.

A different Pentecost? Absolutely. A Spirit-filled Pentecost. Yes. May the Spirit of God who speaks, creates, heals, and unifies us in God's redeemed earth move within you, within us.