

**Pentecost Sunday  
May 31, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the spirit.  
Amen.**

*"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."* This is the opening sentence of our reading from the book of Acts, and I have to confess, it makes me sad. In a literal sense, many of us can't relate to what the sentence describes. Because of COVID-19, it is not prudent for us to be "together in one place." We're confined to our homes, we can't gather for worship, ministry, prayer and fellowship, and we don't know when we'll share bread and wine again around a common table. It feels difficult to consider togetherness ... much less celebrate a great feast day like Pentecost ... in this context.

However ... in another sense ... we are all in one place. We are in a hard place ... a hollow place ... a place of vulnerability and grief. We are together in our uncertainty. We are together in our loss. Together in our hopes and fears. Across all sorts of distances ... geographical, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic ... we are bound together as one people, one humanity, one planet, facing a common threat that knows no borders. Like the disciples in our Gospel reading for this week, we are huddled together behind locked doors, waiting for Jesus to come among us and say, "Peace be with you." Waiting for Jesus to breathe on us ... waiting for him to speak the words we long for so desperately: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Pentecost ... from the Greek *pentekostos*, meaning "fiftieth" ... was a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest. It is also a celebration of Moses bring the Law ... on two stone tablets ... down from Mount Sinai. In the New Testament Pentecost story Luke tells, the Holy Spirit descended on 120 believers in Jerusalem on the fiftieth day after Jesus's resurrection. The Spirit empowered them to testify to God's saving work, emboldened the apostle Peter to preach to a bewildered crowd of Jewish skeptics, and drew three thousand converts from around the known world in one day. For many Christians, Pentecost marks the birthday of the Church.

The story Luke describes is a fanciful one ... full of details that challenge one's imagination. Tongues of fire ... rushing wind ... audacious preaching ... mass baptism. Yet, at its heart, the Pentecost story is not about spectacle and drama. It's about the Holy Spirit showing up and transforming ordinary, imperfect, frightened people into a new kind of community ... an new kind of faith community ... what we now call the Body of Christ. It's about God disrupting and disorienting our routine ways of engaging the sacred, so that something new and holy can be born within and among us. It's about the Spirit carrying us out of suspicion ... out of tribalism and silos ... and out of fear ... into a radical new way of engaging God and our neighbor.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit," the author of Acts writes, "and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." "At this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."

Christians often speak of Pentecost as the reversal of Babel, the Old Testament story in which God divided and scattered human communities by multiplying their languages. In fact, Pentecost didn't reverse Babel ... it perfected and blessed it. When the Holy Spirit came, she didn't restore humanity to a common language. On that Pentecost ... the beginning of this new community of faith ... she declared all languages holy ... and all languages equally worthy of God's stories. From the very beginning, the Holy Spirit wove diversity and inclusiveness into the very fabric of the Church.

Languages carry the full weight of their respective cultures, histories, psychologies, and spiritualities. To speak one language as opposed to another is to orient oneself differently in the world ... to see differently, hear differently, process and punctuate reality differently. To speak across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or politics is to challenge stereotype and risk ridicule. It is a brave and disorienting act.

Has there ever been a time when we've needed such brave, border-crossing acts more acutely than we do right now? In the midst of this COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic comes another death ... George Floyd. This is the horrible consequence of a long history of racism being played out in the deaths of too many black people ... just because they are black. While the world focuses on numbers killed by an invisible culprit, a man asking for breath, dies in front of a camera.

Steven Charleston is a the retired Episcopal Bishop of Alaska. He is a Native American. These are his words:

One man dies in the street, pleading for his life, and overnight those street erupt in anger over the injustice not only for that dreadful moment, but for a lifetime of oppression. One hundred thousand die from the virus, all innocent victims of a heartless disease, but a balance of color shows that more die from one community than from others. Racisms breeds death, either visibly for the whole world to see, or silently, hidden beneath the statistics and the excuses. May the Spirit empower us to face this reality, and not turn away. Racism is dangerous as COVID-19, infecting people who seem to have no outward symptoms, until behavior reveals their disease. The vaccine for racism is justice, the cure is equality, the prevention is love.

As the world grows more and more tribal ... as nations ... cities ... and even faith communities turn on each other out of suspicion and selfishness ... as we're forced by the pandemic to physically separate from those around us ... can it be that God desires to pour out the Holy Spirit on us, so that we might learn new and life-giving ways of being a faith community ... being the Church ... being the Body of Christ ... being Love incarnate for a frightened and imperiled world? What languages do we need to speak right now that we've never spoken

before? Where does the fire need to fall, to burn away all that hinders us from being bearers of God's light and love in this dark time?

Today, even in this atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism, people are speaking in different languages. Some people are listened because they are hearing their language of the heart, and into those astonishing exchanges, God is breathing fresh life.

Something happens when we speak each other's languages ... literally and figuratively. We experience the limits of our own words and perspectives. We learn curiosity. We discover that God's "great deeds" are far too nuanced for a single tongue, a single fluency.

I hope that the Pentecost story compels us, because it's a story for this time, this moment. As we continue to face the coronavirus pandemic as people of faith ... and as we face horrific consequences of racism in our backyard ... we may be tempted to despair, or to turn in on ourselves and forget that we are part of a much larger whole. We live in a world where words have become toxic, where the languages of so many cherished "isms" threaten to divide and destroy us. The troubles of our day are global, civilizational, catastrophic. If we don't learn the art of speaking across the borders that currently separate us, we will burn ourselves down to ash.

It is no small thing that the Holy Spirit loosened tongues to break down barriers on the birthday of the Church. In the face of difference, God compelled his people to engage. In the face of fear, Jesus breathed forth peace. Out of the heart of deep difference, God birthed the Church. So happy birthday, sisters and brothers. Receive the Holy Spirit. Together, may we grow into all that Christ longs to pour into us.

Amen.