

Pentecost Sunday

May 31, 2020

Pastor Zach Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel Reading: Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, [the apostles] 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.’”

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In the beginning the earth was a formless void, but then God’s spirit/God’s breath/the life force of all things moved over the waters and life was created. When God made Adam from the dirt, his body was a mere vessel of tissue and bones until God breathed the Spirit into Adam and he became alive! The same thing happened in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones. Thousands of bodies were reanimated from



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dry bones, but until Ezekiel prophesied to the breath/the lifeforce from God to enter into the bodies, they remained dead. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples and they became alive with the power of God's Word! In Luke's version, found in the books of Acts, the Holy Spirit/God's breath of life comes like a rush like a violent wind and tongues as of fire descending upon the disciples so that the power of God's Word is proclaimed through them in different languages. On that day of Pentecost God gave the breath of life/the Spirit again to the chaotic world and breathed it alive with the birth of the church.

Since that day of Pentecost, it has been the mission of the church to spread God's lifeforce to the ends of the earth by proclaiming the abundant life given to all the world through Christ's death and resurrection. When we speak a life-giving word about Christ's love—a love that conquers death; a love that brings grace and forgiveness; a love that unbinds the oppressed and sets the captive free; a love that reminds us that our true identity is beloved child of God no matter the color of our skin—we are participating in God's action of breathing new life, bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit to broken people who are choking from the despair and hopelessness of sin.

The gift and mission of Pentecost is needed more than ever in our society right now. Not only because the pandemic of COVID-19 continues, but also because racism is still alive and tearing our country apart. It was heartbreaking, it was disgusting, it was enraging, and it was evil to see the Minneapolis police officer choke God's lifeforce out of George Floyd. The breath of God is a gift that creates and sustains life. It is to be cherished and celebrated in all people. When things like this happen to members of Christ's body, it chokes the life out of the entire body. We should all be angry and heartbroken at what happened to brother George.

Of course, what makes this even harder to talk about is all the rioting that has taken place since George's death was announced this past Monday. Like I mentioned in a Facebook post earlier this week, I am torn and conflicted over the rioting that is going on. It is clear that the violence and the fear has distracted our society from the main issue at hand, which is the death of George Floyd and the systemic racism that continues to ruin our society. Of course, evidence shows that some of this fear and violence has been instigated by white supremacists to place blame on the Black community, and some of the fear and violence has been caused by police using different means to try and provoke peaceful protestors into lashing out.

But I am also conflicted because, for those members of the Black community who are rioting, it is because we as a society have given them little choice in how to gain our attention. Our society has a history of either tearing down or ignoring the peaceful protests of the Black community. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "Riots are the language of the unheard." He also goes on to say that before he can condemn the rioting he must also condemn and draw attention to the systems in place that have caused the people who riot to become so desperate in getting our attention.



I never want to condone violence of any kind, for I believe in the God of love, and I believe that the key to transforming hearts is through compassion and love. However, we all need to do a better job of listening to our Black brothers and sisters. Yes, we must condemn the violence being done by white supremacists and the police who try and provoke protestors during these riots, but we also need to pay attention to the cries of the Black community.

If we truly believe in the gift of Pentecost, then our mission as a church is clear. To truly continue to participate in God's action of bringing new life into our broken world through the life force of the Holy Spirit, which proclaims God's infinite love through Christ Jesus, then we must give a listen to the unheard. We must use our power and privilege to help others come to realize that the voices of the black community have the life force of God within them, which means not only are they too God's beloved, but they too were created in God's image and should be treated with equal dignity, opportunity, and respect. The black community in our neighborhoods, in our city, in our country, and throughout the world are part of Christ's body. To remain passive to their suffering due to racism is to kill the entire body of Christ.

Thanks be to God that we have been given the gift of Pentecost and we are free to proclaim a life-giving word to this broken world. Christ Jesus has freed us from the power of sin and the power of fear. Christ's love has freed us to see all human beings as beloved; to cherish all life. The gift of Pentecost is once again calling us to baptize this world with fire; not a destructive fire that destroys, but the fire of refinement; the fires that create something by burning away the old and reforming it into something new. Think about molten lava eventually cooling off to form new land. Or, think about once metal is melted down by fire it can be formed into a useful tool by a blacksmith.

God is calling us to set the world ablaze with the fire of the Holy Spirit so that the good news of God's love can transform people from a place of hatred and fear to a place of compassion and love. We, the church can be a different voice in the world. We can be a voice that uplifts those oppressed by racism by reminding this world that they too are God's beloved and deserve the right to an abundant life. And we can do this because Christ has freed us to do so; God has given us the power of the Holy Spirit to do so.

It is time for us to step up and be active against racism as a Christian community. Too many of our black brothers and sisters have paid the price with their lives over society's complacency with the systems of power that continue to fuel racism. We proclaim a God who comes to give abundant life to the entire world; we proclaim a God who calls all of humanity beloved; we proclaim a God who has freed us from the captivity of fear, sin, and evil. So, let's use the power of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Pentecost, and continue to help God breathe new life into our broke world.

Amen.



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