

Sermon, Pentecost 2020

St. Jude's, Cupertino

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Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit.

Come as the wind and cleanse us.

Come as the fire and purge us.

Come as the dove and give us hope.

Convict, convert, consecrate us

that we may receive your Pentecostal gifts. Amen.

Despite the traditional festivities that this day usually calls forth, this year it is tempered with sorrow. Our world has changed. We have lost more than one hundred and five thousand lives to the Corona-virus, an incomprehensible number of lost Americans, more than the number that died in both the Korean and Vietnam wars. If you have ever been to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., and walked the length of that wall, you know the vastness of the number. Covid19 has taken most of its victims from the elderly, the sick, our veterans, and from the poorest of our communities, mostly minority, and it shows little signs of abating, even growing now to include children in its sweep.

And this week our nation is called to face once more the eruption of an older and more persistent virus, that of racism, which was seeded on our shores four hundred years ago and rears its cruel and brutal head even in the midst of a pandemic. The death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, at the hands of four police officers on the streets of Minneapolis, and recorded for the world to witness, has shown us in painful detail the

brutality unto death that minorities are regularly suffering in our midst. This is difficult to acknowledge but we have recently witnessed, on our national news, videos showing the deaths of Arnaud Arbury, and before that Philando Castile, and before that Eric Garner, who like George Floyd, pleaded for his breath. And there are many others who are not videoed, but we hear of their deaths, all people of color, men and women and children: Breanna Taylor, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Emmet Till. And many more that have silently slipped past the scrutiny of others. It is fearful to think of the actual number. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, over fifty years ago, that “police brutality, with community support, or at best indifference, is a daily experience” for many black people. He said that, in all too many areas of the south, and now we may assume in other areas of our nation, they live in “a police state which, paradoxically, maintains itself within a democratic republic.” He adds that when the public becomes aware of it, the public often concludes that what was witnessed is an atypical incident of excessive conduct but they do not understand that the behavior is “habitual, not exceptional.” (A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. James M Washington, Harper and Row, 1986, p. 172.

And so, here we are now beginning the summer of 2020 with protests of raw grief and righteous anger across this country as well as heightened concern and legitimate fear about the uncontained pandemic. Peaceful protests have erupted into violence and claimed another life, that of Patrick Underwood, a Federal Protective Service Officer, shot and killed in Oakland. We must hold in mind the pain these two viruses have caused during this traditional festival of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. But we are not alone. This weekend, our Presiding Bishop, along

with leaders of other Christian churches, as well as Jewish and Muslim communities, have chosen to have their celebrations tempered with sorrow.

Let us look to our lessons for what they teach:

Our first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles tells of the day when the Holy Spirit came to seize the followers of Jesus with power and authority. They were so surprised and suffused with joy, purpose, and belonging to God's universe that they were mistaken as drunk. It happened during the Jewish Feast of Weeks, now called Shavuot, one of the three most important Jewish festivals, one that celebrates the harvest as well as the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. It came seven weeks after Passover, and so came to be known as Pentecost (a Greek word meaning fiftieth) because it was celebrated fifty days after the Sabbath on which Passover began.

The named disciples, as well as the women followers including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus' brothers, were gathered in Jerusalem when suddenly there was a sound like a mighty wind and flames like tongues of fire appeared over each of them. Then they began to speak in many languages about the wonders of God. Jews from the far-flung regions of the diaspora gathered around the community and could suddenly hear what was being said in their individual languages and they marveled at what was happening.

All of them knew well the story of the tower of Babel from the book of Genesis. They knew how the people of Babel originally had one language and decided to build a great city with a tower to pierce the heavens so as to make a name for themselves. And they knew God had punished them for their pride and had confused their language and scattered the inhabitants.

And here in Jerusalem, they were suddenly able to understand each other although they spoke in many tongues. What was happening was that the Holy Spirit, the aspect of the Trinity which is God at work in the church and in the world, had entered the disciples. The Holy Spirit came as wind to cleanse and as fire to purge. But mainly, the Holy Spirit came to change them. Now this was not the first appearance of the Holy Spirit in history. It was the Holy Spirit that brooded over creation in the beginning of the world. It was the Holy Spirit that spoke and still speaks through the prophets. It was the Holy Spirit by which Jesus was conceived of Mary. And the Holy Spirit is still acting today in the Church and in the process of sanctification by which each of us is drawn closer and closer to God.

The Holy Spirit was there from the beginning. In Hebrew and Aramaic — Jesus' native language — the word for the Spirit of God is *ruach* which literally means breath or wind and, it is feminine in gender. The New Testament was first written in Greek and the Greek word for spirit is *pneuma* (as in *pneumonia*) which also literally means wind and is neuter in gender. In English we have referred to the Holy Spirit as "he" (probably from the Latin 'spiritus' which is masculine) but "she" is more appropriate since it comes from the original languages and would be historically correct. In any case, it is the Holy Spirit who suddenly appeared at Pentecost and, for the first time, infused the young church with her power and continues to guide the church.

She does this by moving among us, between us, and inside us. She helps us to find our own unique gifts and ways to serve God. She moves into the hearts of people and communities, and helps them find ways into alignment with God's purpose. Correction sometimes must come first. Since most of us tend to not see our faults, she must often first make us

see, in other words --convict us and then convert us anew. Often she works through our consciences. She is also known as the Spirit of Truth and is therefore not domesticated to our wills. Jesus warns us to beware the sin against the Holy Spirit. That sin is to deny her truth and to do so, damages the soul. And St. Paul, in Ephesians, warns against doing anything that "grieves the Spirit." Rage, anger, harsh words, and violence grieve the Spirit.

Our first lesson from Acts offers several rich lessons but I was especially struck this week by the origins of the different people who gathered and witnessed what was taking place: "Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, Rome, Cretans, and Arabs." I looked up the places named and it was essentially the whole known world of the time, people from Europe, Africa, and Asia even extending as far as India and China. The early church was becoming a very big tent. And Africa was as welcome as Asia and Europe was as welcome as both.

Our second lesson speaks of the gifts of the Spirit. As generously as a loving mother gives gifts to her children, calls them forth, dispenses them, instructs and develops them. Most often we think of spiritual gifts as individual but they can be given to churches, communities, even nations and groups of nations. I would like to mention two movements which I believe the Holy Spirit has given to the larger faith community. There are more examples of her gifts but two are especially relevant this morning:

The first began in the aftermath of the Second World War and was international. Because of the holocaust, Christian thinkers following the 1940's suddenly had to look at the reality of evil, and struggle with a

theology that could allow for the suffering of so many innocents. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, what evolved was a new theology which understood God as one that suffered with us. Christian and Jewish theologians worked together to understand how such evil could happen and in the hope that they could insure that it did not happen again.

No longer was God viewed as the mighty warrior, the triumphant savior, rather God was the suffering servant who was revealed in all who suffered, who identified with the pain of the world, and who urged our compassion and solidarity with those who were victimized. But it was not an ineffectual God, rather it was a God of creative, non-compelling, self-giving good in the midst of pain. We now understand God more as a cry for life in the midst of suffering. And when we ignore those cries, we know that we are ignoring God.

The second movement was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. which was a national movement but helped inspire similar movements elsewhere. It enabled us to understand God as one who set the captives free and broke the chains that bound African Americans to second class citizenship— and also bound successive generations of white Americans to the sins of racism and unconscious white privilege. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians came to see that the long-standing legacy of slavery in the United States and the continued dehumanizing treatment of men and women of color had dehumanized all of us and our entire nation, and so the churches, beginning with the traditional black churches, called us back to the roots of our faith and to a clear understanding that slavery in Egypt and racist laws had much in common.

We gained appreciation of the richness and beauty of African American theology and religious music. But just as the evil of fascism can

take root if we are not vigilant, so racism finds fertile ground unless it is identified and challenged and uprooted each time. Our nation is now being challenged on a great scale —and in the midst of a health crisis —and we must find ways to do the justice required of us. It is painfully clear that we have much more to do if there is to be liberty and justice for all, but we pray and trust the Holy Spirit will guide us in the work ahead.

In Paul's epistle, he lists nine gifts of the Spirit. They are: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, the gift of faith, the gift of healing, the working of miracles, the gift of prophecy, the discernment of spirits, the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. And he stated that while there are varieties of gifts and varieties of services and varieties of activities, all serve the same Spirit. All are ways in which the Spirit flows through us. As you hear and reflect on them this morning, I hope you will listen for ones that call out to you, that speak to you of your vocation. And I hope you may also recognize a particular gift in another person and, if you do, let that person know. Perhaps they have yet to recognize that gift and you may be the catalyst that reveals it.

The poet T. S. Eliot had a religious conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927 and soon afterwards wrote his poem, "Ash Wednesday" in which he repeated the phrase, "Redeem the time." At first reading, the phrase may seem odd: time may not seem in need of redemption. Yet, if we pause and reflect on time, we realize that it is one of the great problems for philosophers in particular and human beings in general. Life is full of error, regrets, mistakes. And it's not just us. We live in history. The daily newspapers and television news chronicle crime and cruelty, disease and catastrophe, scandal and degeneration. Good news is seldom on the front page and our lives fit into this larger history and at times are absorbed by it.

"Redeem the time," the poet repeats. With what are we to change, redeem, convert the time, we may ask. And Charles Williams, that wonderfully eccentric Anglican writer and theologian, answers in his book "The Descent of the Dove." He writes, "The conversion of time by the Holy [Spirit] is ...the grand activity of the Church." I'll repeat it, "The conversion of time by the Holy [Spirit] is ...the grand activity of the Church."

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come to his followers and on Pentecost, the promise was fulfilled. The Holy Spirit comes with the full force of the presence of God and she continues to work toward the perfecting of the church and the completing of each one of us. The Holy Spirit is here, now, among us, between us, inside us. She continues to breathe new life into each one of us and gives us tools for redeeming the time. With her help, we can redeem the time of our lives. We can wrest time from its relentless movement toward decay and death and claim it for eternity.

It is my prayer today, and I hope you join me, that those terrible nearly nine minutes in which the life breath of George Floyd was stilled will be redeemed by the Holy Spirit and become the catalyst for a new birth of freedom for this nation and ALL of her people, free from the racism and structured violence that holds us in bondage now. "Redeem the time." That is the grand activity of the Church and we are the Church.

Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit.

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Come as the fire and purge us.

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Convict, convert, consecrate us

that we may receive and use your Pentecostal gifts. Amen.

Four days of the church year are designated as especially appropriate for baptisms. They are the Vigil of Easter, the Baptism of our Lord, the Day of Pentecost and All Saints day. On those days, the Renewal of our Baptismal Vows takes the place of the Nicene Creed.

Let us now renew our Baptismal Vows.

