

Acts 2-Pentecost

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The story of Pentecost would be spectacular at the movie theater, on the big screen, making full use of special effects...the wind, the fire, the cacophony of voices, the crowds of people hanging on Peter's every word, the splashing of the water as they were baptized, one after another. Through these images, the Acts storyteller attempted to give us some sense of what God's Spirit is and what the Spirit does in the world and in our lives. It's no easy task.

I'm interested...children, what do you think the Holy Spirit is? How does the Spirit appear in the world? What does the Spirit do? I bet every one of you would have a different answer. This isn't surprising. I bet if we asked a group of ministers to explain the Holy Spirit to us, we would likely get different answers from each of them and many would come complete with helpful props to make their point.

The Holy Spirit is like glasses, helping us see things clearly and make good choices. The Holy Spirit is like a book, teaching us and helping us understand one another and the world.

The Holy Spirit is like a flashlight, shining light into darkness, lighting the path ahead.

The Holy Spirit is like an umbrella, protecting us from the storms that come in life. The Holy Spirit is like a blanket, bringing comfort and warmth.

The problem with all of these perfectly lovely explanations is that they tell us what the Holy Spirit is like, but not what it is. Never fear, though, my years of experience as a youth minister prepared me for this. You see, I know that, you, young people, will call out grown-ups when our answers to your questions are unsatisfying. You know when the real answer is, "I don't know," but we are too proud to say that.

So, here is my answer. When I talk about the Holy Spirit, what I am talking about is God's way of being with us. You see, over and over again, the Bible tells us that there is no place we can go where God is not. I believe that can only be true because of God's Spirit. She is everywhere, in each human being, in all of creation.

What this means is that the same Spirit of God is in and around each one of us. The Spirit of God that reminds me that I am not alone is the same Spirit of God that can remind you that you are not alone. The Spirit is mysterious because she dwells with each of us, meets us all where we are, speaks in a language we can each understand and weaves us together in a beautiful, colorful, loud, exciting story that began a long time ago and is still being written today. It's the story of God's interaction with what and who God has created. The same Spirit that moved over the waters in the first story of creation in Genesis is the same Spirit that blew through the room where the Jesus followers were gathered, and that Spirit lives and moves, and breathes life into our world today.

Part of growing in our faith is learning to listen to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes she talks to us through other people, sometimes she talks to us as we daydream or as we read a book or listen to a song. The way you know it's her is that she is always speaking the language of love and is always nudging us to be kind, to stand up for people who are being hurt or bullied, to do the right thing, even when nobody is looking. Right now, in our country, people with black and brown skin are trying, in a lot of ways, to tell us that they are being hurt and they are not being treated fairly. I believe the Spirit is telling us to listen and to believe them. If you have white skin, sometimes people will listen and believe you instead of someone with black or brown skin. That is wrong, but it happens a lot. Since that is true, it's important that, if you have white skin, you are always ready to tell the truth and to stand up for someone who needs help. If you have black or brown skin, I want you to know that the people who are part of this church will always listen to you, believe you, and try to help you. In this church, we do love. The cool thing about the Holy Spirit is she will give you courage to help, to ask for help, and to love other people. If we could see the Holy Spirit, what do you think she or he or they would look like? While I finish my sermon, I invite you to draw a picture of the Holy Spirit. If you send me your picture through Facebook or email, I will be sure we show it next week during worship (because we can do that now!) I look forward to seeing them.

The story in Acts 2 that Dr. Ward shared takes place during one of the Jewish festivals celebrated each year. The joyful festival is called Shavuot and it celebrates two things. First, it is the celebration of the first fruits of the harvest which are to be offered to God, and second, it is the celebration of the giving of the Torah, particularly the Ten Commandments. Recall that Moses, having led the

people from slavery in Egypt to freedom, brought the Torah down to the people from Mt. Sinai. In the telling of the Pentecost story, the author of Acts draws a cool parallel. Just as the story of God's chosen people, finally liberated, signals a re-birth for our Jewish ancestors, for Christians, the Pentecost story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, signals the birth of the Church.

But Pentecost is much more than a birthday, it is an expansion of the plot in God's great story. With Pentecost, the story of God is not just for a chosen group of people any more. In essence the Spirit makes it clear, God chooses everyone. If we were to continue reading in Acts 2, we would learn that as a result of Peter's sermon that day, "...those who welcomed his message were baptized...three thousand persons were added." Three thousand people were baptized.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul talks about the connection between the Holy Spirit and baptism, he wrote "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." We are in *one* Spirit, with *one* body, he insists. Whether we are "Jews or Greeks, slaves or free," the Spirit of God is in and with all of us. In a Pentecost sermon, Rev. Dr. Diana Butler Bass wrote that these words from 1 Corinthians echo Paul's other use of those words, found in Galatians 3:27-28, "As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for you are one in Christ Jesus."

Some people would say these words are Paul's best and that they represent the lens through which his theology should be read. Bass writes, "For centuries, Christians have drawn inspiration from them for causes of justice including abolition, economic reform, and women's rights. Galatians 3:28 is Paul's rallying cry to overcome divisions of race, class, and gender, poetically and theologically interwoven with baptism, proclaiming justice as heart of life as followers of Jesus."

I learned this week that it is possible these words attributed to Paul were not original to him. He may have been quoting from an older source. In his book, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism*, New Testament scholar, Stephen Patterson, argues that these words may very well form the first Christian creed which was recited at baptism by some of

the earliest followers of the Jesus movement. The liturgy probably went something like this:

*For you are all children of God in the Spirit.*

*There is no Jew or Greek,*

*There is no slave or free,*

*There is no male and female;*

*For you are all one in the Spirit.*

This forgotten baptismal creed, with its powerful words, was perhaps shouted by some baptized on that day when wind, fire, and water made the presence of God real. Patterson writes that this forgotten creed, "...is a statement of convictions of the Jesus people. It is not a statement about God, or about the mysteries of Christ. It is about people and who they are, really. In baptism, they were committed to giving up old identities falsely acquired on the basis of baseless assumptions—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—and declared themselves to be children of God (Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle Against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism*, 29).

That's right. We are children of God first. That is the foundation of who we are. The wonderful things that make up the rest of who we are, are all in addition to that, never instead of it. And that is why this week has been such an enormously painful week. I will be honest, I wanted today to be a happy birthday celebration, with bright colors, bubbles, pinwheels and cupcakes! I hope you have cupcakes by the way. But the events of this week have reminded us again that, we do not always act as if we believe each one of us is a child of God.

If we believed it in this nation, George Floyd would not be dead. If we believed it, Amaud Arbery would not be dead. If we believed it, Black men would not be afraid to leave their homes, Black parents would not have to have "the talk" with their children, and it would be perfectly normal for all parents to talk with their children about how beautiful it is that each one of us is different and how wonderful it is that we can learn from and enjoy each other.

But instead, Minneapolis, LA, Chicago, and other cities in our country are burning and we are all lining up on different sides, using social media to blast everyone who disagrees with us. Some of us are yelling, "Burn it down." Others are saying, "I understand why people are angry, but this is not the way." And still others

haven't even acknowledged Mr. Floyd's death and are angry that people are breaking the law by damaging property as they protest. I am guessing some of us feel somewhere in between those responses.

And in the midst of it all, we are grieving the loss of more than 100,000 human beings to COVID-19. There is so much anger and sadness. A member of our church confided in me this week that what she needs to hear from me are words of comfort. I get it, I really do. Don't we all want to be comforted? I know we do. Some of us are self-soothing by eating all the cake and cookies, drinking all the wine, sleeping more than we usually do, obsessively cleaning and landscaping, and honing our sarcasm skills. Life hurts right now.

We are all hurting, but the ones who are most affected are the ones who are living their lives with a knee to their neck, or as Howard Thurman, in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* described it, "with their backs against the wall." Thurman pointed out that Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant and more controlling group. The similarities between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and our Black siblings must be obvious to anyone who has heard even a little bit about Jesus' life. My youngest son, who normally doesn't give any thought to the Bible, called me yesterday as he was trying to make sense of what's happening, he said, "Isn't there some story in the Bible about Jesus overturning tables or something?" The answer is yes. Jesus disrupted the status quo. And we know how that worked out.

Thurman asks a question in the prelude to his book and it's still valid today, "Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin?" Later he says, "I do not pretend that I have found an answer in the pages that follow; but I am deeply convinced that in the general area of my inquiry is to be found the answer without which there can be little hope that men may find in Christianity the fulfillment which it claims for its gospel." In other words, if we cannot find within our faith the reason and the will to overcome the violence of racism and the oppression of injustice, our faith is empty, or worse, misplaced.

In the story of Pentecost, we find the reason, God chooses everyone, not just people with white skin, not just people who speak English or believe what we

believe. God chooses us all. And, hopefully, in the actions of Peter and the thousands who pledged after being baptized,

*For you are all children of God in the Spirit.*

*There is no Jew or Greek,*

*There is no slave or free,*

*There is no male and female;*

*For you are all one in the Spirit.*

...we will find the will.

I wonder if the fire that is burning in our nation's cities is the same fire that was burning the bush as Moses talked to God. I wonder if the fire that is burning in our nation's cities is the same fire that danced among the followers of Jesus that day. If so, that fire will not consume us, it will ignite us. As frightening as this holy disruption seems right now, strangely, it brings me some comfort. It shows me that we have not completely forgotten who we are, who our neighbors are, and who we belong to. I believe the Spirit of God is moving us from complacency to action. And I believe today is a great day, as we celebrate the birthday of the Church, to birth a new Church, a Church that sees dismantling systems of racism and discrimination and making justice happen as its primary reason for being. Friends, we can never experience wholeness until our neighbors can experience wholeness.

I will not celebrate the birthday of a Church that ignores suffering, that cares more about its members saying the right words and claiming salvation for themselves than it does about injustice in the world. I will not celebrate the birthday of a Church whose vision is limited to only a few. So, today, let us celebrate the birthday of a Church that is on fire for justice, a Church that will not be silent in the face of the sin of racism, a Church that throws its doors open to all people and says, "Come in, you are safe here, have a cupcake."

Amen.