

All
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – May 28, 2023

Please Read:
Acts 2:1-21
John 20:19-23

This year Pentecost intersects with Memorial Day. Most people take the opportunity to get away for the long weekend, and end up observing neither Pentecost or Memorial Day. So, I'm glad you're here, and invite you to reflect on the importance of this weekend. Jesus told his disciples to wait until they received power from on high. Almost 2,000 years ago, it was on the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, or the festival of first fruits, a celebration of the giving of the Law of Moses, when people were gathered from around the Roman Empire, fifty days after Passover, and 10 days after the Ascension, when the Spirit came. And the fiery phenomenon changed the world!

The Spirit came down like tongues of fire. They heard a sound like a violent wind. But what is most strange is that *all* the disciples were empowered to speak and the people from many different tribes and nations and each one heard the gospel in their own language. All heard. All were amazed. But it doesn't say that all believed. Some sneered and thought they had a hangover from late night partying. Peter declared no one was drunk, but that what they were witnessing was what the prophet Joel had predicted. God said, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh..." All flesh means *everyone*. Peter goes on to say that everyone, or all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

This morning I invite you to ponder this word "all," and the universal and inclusive gospel event implied and explicitly described in what we call Pentecost. What does it mean in today's context? What does it mean that God's Spirit has been poured out on all flesh? God is at work *in all and all and through all*, Paul says in Ephesians 4:6. Everyone. Every living thing. There's a theological term for this. It's Panentheism. It means literally that "all is in God," but can be interpreted also that God is "in" all. Not that all things are God, but that God's Spirit is at work in all and through all. The question is, are we paying any attention? A related word is enthusiasm. It's a noun to describe being "in God." When is the last time you've been enthusiastic about your faith? About what God is doing in the church?

In our Gospel text Jesus encourages his disciples to receive his peace and the Holy Spirit. The passage from the Gospel is John's version of Pentecost, or the giving of the Spirit. The context is just after the resurrection, and the disciples are afraid and locked themselves in the house. I'll come back to why they were afraid, but Jesus

says to them, “Peace to you” twice. The phrase could be better translated “Peace to you *all*,” because the “you” here is plural. “*Peace to y’all!*”

After the second “peace to you all,” Jesus *breathes* on the disciples and tells them to “receive (the) Holy Spirit.” This is where the breath of Jesus becomes important. The use of *ενεφυσεν* is what scholars call a *hapax legomenon*, meaning this is the only time the word appears in the Greek New Testament! Readers of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) would recognize the word in Genesis 2:7 where “... the Lord God ... *breathed* (*ενεφυσεν*) into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

So, just like the first human was dead until God breathed into them, so the disciples are socially dead (hiding in fear behind locked doors) until Jesus breathes on them! Luke’s version of this is similar. “They were all gathered in one place,” but when the Spirit came upon them, this fearful gathering of regular folks was transformed into a bold and generative community of renewal.

Luke records three thousand welcomed the message and joined the church. So, because of the work of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were transformed from a fearful group hiding to a bold and dynamic group who formed the largest religious group in the world. According to Pew Research Center, the church now numbers well past 2 billion followers and is still growing. In western Europe and the United States, the church is in decline, but in the southern hemisphere, the church is growing. I shared last week how moving it was to hear Chinese and Indian Christian missionaries ask not for prayers to avoid persecution. “That’s how the church will grow,” they said. “Pray not that we avoid persecution, but that we are faithful through suffering.”

Here's where Pentecost gets interesting to me today. Yes, perhaps there is a correlation between suffering and spiritual growth? I’m not an advocate of suffering for sure, but I do know that suffering focuses us on what is most important... When I’m suffering, I become afraid, and I tend to shut down. The same is true for most people, and the same was true for the disciples. So, now I want to come back to why the disciples were afraid. John writes they were hiding in a locked room for “fear of the *Ιουδαίοι*.” This literally can be translated as “the Jews,” but I think a more accurate translation is for “fear of the Jewish Collaborators.” The disciples were Jews, remember. But there were certain groups in the Jewish community who were collaborating with the Roman authorities and the followers of Jesus were on the top of the “wanted” list. When Jesus showed up, he immediately engaged in a power struggle. It was inevitable. As the Living God, the Creator of all things, a conflict would erupt between any and all who would usurp his rightful authority. Naturally,

the Romans had to put Jesus down. “Caesar is Lord!” was the cry of the day. So, saying “Jesus is Lord!” is subversive. Treasonous. That’s why the Romans hung Jesus on a cross with a sign that mocked him, saying, “King of the Jews.”

But Jesus rose from the dead and poured out his Spirit upon all flesh. And Joel said that when this happens, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. It crossed gender and age lines. It crossed social/class lines: Slaves, those on the very bottom of the social ladder received the Spirit and were transformed!

The Spirit of God at work in and through all people is a powerful liberating force and collides with any social structure that tries to put some people on top and other people on the bottom, or any kind of political system that centers one group of people and excludes others. The Spirit sets people free from the bondage of any kind of structure or system that shackles or devalues you. In Christ, you are a beloved child of God, and if a child, then an heir. In Christ, you are “Somebody!” and in the church, you are a brother, a sister, a sibling and hopefully reminded every time we meet that you are of infinite value and worth in the eyes of God.

Perhaps this is why I am so very uncomfortable with the so-called “Christian Nationalism” that is emerging on the current political scene. Christian Nationalism seems to be cooking up a toxic mash of the worst of Christian sectarianism with a thuggish brand of patriotism. It smacks of xenophobia and bigotry. I’m all for liberty and justice for all, that all are created equal and endowed by our Creator with the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...but the point is, some variations of Christian Nationalism today seem to be thinly disguised white supremacy. Whenever you start banning books or stop talking about real issues/history, it starts feeling like Orwell’s *1984*...

In a recent NYT opinion article, Michelle Goldberg reminds us, “Christians are called to serve God, not a political party, to put our faith in a higher power, not in human beings. We’re taught not to bow to false idols. Yet idolatry is increasingly prominent and our foundational principles — humility, kindness and compassion — in short supply.”¹ Friends, we may be called to suffer simply to restore decency and civility, because we of all people should know that *all* people are worthy of respect and basic courtesy. Pentecost is not about *liking* all people, but it is about *loving* all people. That’s what the Spirit empowers us to do. I encouraged young Terence here

¹ Peter Catapano, “What a Surge in Christian nationalism can do to a state,” (Opinion Today, *New York Times*, May 24, 2023).

learn the fruit of the Spirit in confirmation class: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Wouldn’t our public discourse sound a lot different if we all were filled with the Spirit and lived by the Spirit, allowing the fruit of the Spirit to blossom in our life together?

One final note. There seems to be an important connection here between receiving the Spirit, peace and forgiveness. We need to strive for justice, but I’ll never forget what my philosophy professor, Diogenes Allen, once asked me, “Scott, are you sure you want to receive justice? I think we should pray for forgiveness and mercy.” In the Harvard commencement ceremony last Thursday, Tom Hanks was the trusted keynote speaker. It was interesting that throughout his speech he talked about liberty and justice, but when it came to the final blessing, he said, “May goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your lives.” We need to work for liberty and justice for all, but at the same time, we need to learn to forgive and let it go. Perhaps that is where true freedom and peace is found?

Whatever it is, it’s for all. Pentecost reminds us the Spirit of God is at work in and through all of us. If we are living by the Spirit, we will be empowered to love others and give of ourselves enthusiastically to build a better life and fairer world for all. On this Memorial Day weekend, we honor all of those who have given their lives in service to our country and the cause of freedom and peace. But it is for us in the church to give our lives to remember and protect the fundamental human rights God intends for all people... to remember that all are created by God with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... but that, in the end, we all need mercy... The Spirit of God has been poured out on all flesh. All!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.