

Pentecost, Year A

5/31/2020

Acts 2:1-21, 1 Cor. 12:3b-13, Jn. 20:19-23

Eliza Linley

“I can’t breathe.” Those were the last words of George Floyd as his windpipe was crushed under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, the same thing Eric Garner said as he expired 6 years ago under similar conditions. “I can’t breathe” might well have been the last words of thousands of people just before they were intubated for COVID-19, a disease that’s taken over 100,000 Americans, one that’s hit communities of color and poor people the hardest. Certainly fewer would have died had our “leaders” valued science over ideology, or human life above money and power. It’s as though their knees were pressed down over those throats. Our cities, already stressed over whether and when to stay-in-place or try to open up, are now plagued by civic unrest as well: both peaceful protest and pure rage over historic and ongoing injustice. As anyone who’s tried to exercise with a mask on knows, it can seem like there’s no air to breathe anywhere. “I can’t breathe” is a challenge to our moral credentials as white people and people of privilege. Silence in this case perpetuates injustice.

And here we are on the Feast of Pentecost, the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit: *Ruach* in Hebrew, *Pneuma* in Greek, it’s the breath, the holy wind of God. What implications does the breath of God have for us, that breath that can be as quiet as a still, small voice, or can blow the roof off of the places we hide for fear? “Breathe on me, breath of God; fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do”.

Some say that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, but I think that may be an effort to tamp down a Spirit that is not really tame-able. At Pentecost, the disciples found themselves speaking in tongues, that is, the tongues of other Jews living in Jerusalem at the time, the miracle being that everyone in the crowd could understand what was being said about God’s deeds of power. The Holy Spirit was able to overcome differences of language and culture and race in ways that we, on our own, have a hard time doing. It’s a metaphor for our current time.

St. John's mission statement says that we make no peace with injustice. The Holy Spirit is always pushing us, even behind our masks and especially in this dark time, to speak out with a single voice of compassion and mercy. THAT's what it means to be church today.

The structure of how we do church has changed radically in the last two and a half months. And that age-old question of evangelism as how we get more people into the building has now been proven to be utterly moot. Although it will not always be so, at the moment we might as well not have a building. We might as well be like those disciples who met in an upper room, or anywhere at all. In fact, we can only meet like this. That first Pentecost was a breaking open, a disjuncture from previous understandings. Instead of expressing gratitude for the Law (the previous understanding of Pentecost), it broke the Law wide open. "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men see visions, your old men dream dreams, and even slaves will be filled with the Spirit."

What we celebrate today is the coming of the Holy Spirit to that tiny group of followers who were still wondering what to make of the Ascension. But reading over these texts this morning, you have to wonder if we haven't spent the last couple of millenia trying to tamp down the Holy Spirit, to domesticate something that just can't be put in a box. We say, "Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove", the Comforter, Counsellor, Intercessor. Yet what we have in the reading from Acts is a violent wind with the sound of a hurricane that set the disciples' hair on fire and made them babble ecstatically in foreign languages. What could possibly have prepared them for this, what must have been a world-shattering experience of the creative power of God? It was so weird people had no idea what to make of them: they were astounded, they were amazed, they were bewildered, and some thought they were drunk, although, as Peter said, it was only 9 am and the bars weren't even open yet! And still today, 2,000 years later, the Holy Spirit is not something you can tame.

Much has been made of divisions between people of faith. Religious and racial differences are nothing new. Even in our gospel we read that "the doors of the house

where the disciples met were locked for fear of the Jews”, and we think, “Wait a minute! Wasn’t everybody in this story Jewish?” And we remember that Jesus told them that they had the power, now, to forgive and retain sins. If we’re not the People of the Building but of the Way of Love, then our work as healers and reconcilers is to point out discrimination where we see it, even if it’s in the gospel. We remember, in the work of re-opening our churches, that God does not require human sacrifice, and that our worship involves deeds of love and mercy in the world, becoming proactive for those who are most at risk and who are risking more for the common good: people who can’t stay home, who must go out to work: agriculture workers, as well as healthcare, transportation, public safety workers.

The world is a strange and scary place these days. And the church does not shelter us from the world, but points us toward the grace and love of God, and the strangeness of the Holy Spirit. We may try to take refuge in the church, like the disciples tried to in the upper room, but the Spirit just keeps on sending us out. It puts wind in the sails of the Jesus Movement. The Spirit shows us Jesus and brings us to the Father. Above all, the Holy Spirit drives us, even now, out into the world, beyond the safety of our individual and collective Upper Rooms. The work of the church has always been outside the church. Remember that the disciples were suddenly able to speak in the languages of those around them. What does that imply for us who speak “church”, but aren’t very good at translating that into the language of contemporary culture and experience? And do we understand the language of the Spirit so that we grasp the implications of the gospel for the way we live? The Holy Spirit pushes us beyond where we think we can go – beyond ourselves, our abilities, our expectations, and our safety levels. Once that fire is lit within each of us, or within our community, it is God and not we ourselves who is in charge. Much as we profess to want that, it can be uncomfortable. We’re not used to speaking up in situations where our own wellbeing doesn’t seem to be at risk. But this is the power of God that changes lives. So how do we reconcile our own discomfort with the God who calls us at Pentecost?

Jesus calls this the Spirit of Truth: it’s the creative energy that pushes us toward reconciliation, kindness, forgiveness. It breathes life in the midst of death. It gives us new eyes to see and new ears to hear, and new voices to speak God’s love. This is no

destructive force, but the power that changes lives, reunites what has been torn apart, reconciles the alienated. So, in the words of Jesus, “do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid”. What Jesus offers as a parting gift, through all of the turmoil and uncertainty of our lives, and through injustice that seems intractable, is that peace which the world cannot give. It is a hard-won peace. May we hear – and respond - when someone cries, “I can’t breathe!” May we be truly open to the spirit of Pentecost.