

Pentecost Day  
May 31, 2020  
All Saints' Episcopal Church  
Teri Daily

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Teri Daily on Pentecost, May 31, 2020...*

Today is Pentecost, the 50<sup>th</sup> and last day of the Easter season. Pentecost means “fiftieth” – and it was actually a Jewish festival before it was a Christian one. Pentecost is the Jewish Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot. Coming fifty days after Passover, Pentecost was, for Jews, a celebration of the wheat harvest – a time when Jews would make a pilgrimage to the Temple from far and wide, offering up the first-fruits of their harvest. That’s why in today’s reading from Acts, Jerusalem was, even more than usual, a bustling city of “devout Jews from every nation under heaven.”

The followers of Jesus are all together in one place in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. We don’t know here if the “they” in Luke’s statement refers just to the apostles, or if it refers to the entire group of believers (which we are told a few verses earlier numbers 120 people). A sound “like the rushing of a violent wind” fills the entire house. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appear among them, and a tongue rests on each of them” (Acts 2:2-3).

It wasn’t the first time that the divine presence was made manifest in the sound of wind – the wind blew over the waters at creation, it was wind from God that drove back the sea so that the Hebrews could escape from Egypt on dry land, and it was a wind from God that brought quail for Israel to eat in the wilderness. Israel also already knew God’s presence in fire – God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, a fire went before the Israelites to lead them through the wilderness, and God descended like a fire upon Mount Sinai when God gave the Law to Israel.

But this time the divine presence was made known in another way as well. When the followers of Jesus are all filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin “to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4). All the Jews in the city hear people speaking to them about the power of God, each in their own language, and they are amazed. A group of Jesus’ followers, people who have been sequestered away, at times fearfully, are now boldly proclaiming the gospel – first and foremost among them the very one who had betrayed Jesus the night of his arrest. What a transformation! And that transformation ignited as chain reaction of transformation – three thousand people were baptized that day. And the Church was formed.

Pentecost is known as the birthday of the Church because the Holy Spirit is the bond that forms us into a community. After all, the Holy Spirit came upon the believers when they were all together, not upon them one at a time here and there. And, yes, although a different tongue of fire rested on each of those gathered, it was for a coordinated mission. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that it is the Holy Spirit that gives to each a particular gift – one wisdom, one knowledge, one faith, another healing, prophecy, discernment, miracles, tongues, or interpretation of tongues. But each gift is for the common good. The Spirit binds us together and transforms us into one body with a common mission – to restore all people to unity with God and each other.

The Spirit knows that we need one another, that we are not complete without one another. And so the Holy Spirit never stops its work of reconciliation; it never stops pushing our boundaries further and further out whether we as individuals feel ready or not – past barriers of language or nationality; past categories of male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, documented or undocumented, queer or straight, stranger or friend; past differences in color, religion, occupation, or age. The Spirit is always revealing the truth that we are bound together so deeply that I cannot be whole until you are whole, I cannot be free until you are free, I cannot be fully human until you, too, are recognized as fully human. Salvation in the bible is always a communal event.

Richard Renaldi is one of the world's best-known portrait photographers. One of his projects, *Touching Strangers*, emerged from his realization that strangers are bound to one another with what he calls an invisible glue. He described it to a reporter this way: "When you see a group of people waiting to cross the street and they don't know each other, for that moment they are together. I always thought there was some magic in that." Renaldi began traveling around to bus stations all over the country. When he saw two people who were strangers to one another, he would ask them to pose together, touching one another in some way. The photographs are amazing. As Renaldi said, the message is more than "Let's get along" because we see in the photographs that in our society things are complicated, textured, layered.

When asked if he thought photography had the power to unite people, Renaldi replied that he didn't know. He expressed his reservation with these words: "There is a strong counter-culture to the power of photography, which is human bias. I hope the power of truth, and the power of documentation, can help convince people to take action, but often when people are presented with the truth, they ignore it."[\[1\]](#)

The truth that we need one another, that we are not complete without one another, goes largely unrecognized. We live blind to (or at least unmoved by) the needs and conditions of those around us. Tragedies mark our life together as frequently as mile-markers on a highway: George Floyd's death in Minneapolis with a knee bearing down on his neck, Ahmaud Arbery shot for jogging while black, the 4.8 million women who experience physical assaults and rapes at the hand of their partner each year, the 1 in 3 women worldwide who have experienced sexual or other violence, mass incarceration, people turned away from receiving healthcare, one in four children in Arkansas unsure of their next meal. Each person is endowed with the image of God within them, but one look at our society and our own behavior reveals that we are oblivious to it. We need a dramatic appearance of the Holy Spirit in the world today every bit as much as we did 2000 years ago.

Pentecost is a baptismal feast in the Church; in a few moments, we will recite the Baptismal Covenant. We will remember that we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever, but that we are not alone in Christ. When asked if we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, we will reply: I will, with God's help. When asked if we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being, we will reply: I will, with God's help. When asked if we will proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, we will reply: I will, with God's help.

Each person has intrinsic worth, something we see over and over again in the loving way Jesus' walked among us. This is the gospel; this is what we are called to proclaim with the help of the Holy Spirit; this is what it means to Be the Church.

Just like the Church's first Pentecost, each person we meet may need to hear the good news in a unique way. The gospel doesn't come in a one-shape-fits-all. Just as there were many languages on the day of Pentecost, so may the Holy Spirit speak through us in many different ways – in a smile to one who is lonely, in hospitality to the stranger, in protest against injustice, in medicine for one who is sick, in a safe space for one who feels threatened. Ghandi once said, "There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread." People are hungry for many things.

Today let's get back to our baptismal covenant. Just as Jesus' followers spent time in prayer and preparation waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, we must do that work as well. We need to listen to the movement of the Holy Spirit as it teaches us and helps us to discern the answer to two major questions: How does the world need to hear the gospel? What gifts have we been given? Every time these two things come together and we have the courage to act, the invisible glue us made visible and it's Pentecost all over again, no matter the Church calendar. So today and every day, may the cry arise from the depths of our hearts: Come, Holy Spirit, come!

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[1] "Portrait of Humanity: Richard Renaldi on the glue that binds us all together," *British Journal of Photography* website, <https://www.bjp-online.com/2018/09/portrait-of-humanity-richard-renaldi-on-the-glue-that-binds-us-all-together/>, accessed May 29, 2020.