

Pentecost 2020 Sermon

May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* "

Why in the *world* were there **so** many people gathered in Jerusalem? So many *foreigners*? Luke goes to great length to name the variety of places from which

they come: Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Arabia, Asia – and more. They come from all over the known world, and gather in Jerusalem. Why?

For the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Originally a harvest festival, Pentecost had become a celebration of God’s giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. God’s instructions for how people should live were carved in the two stone tablets Moses carried down from the mountain. And faithful Jews had been led by that Law, the Torah, for over a millennium. *This* is what they were celebrating.

In our reading from Acts, it is 10 days after Jesus had physically left this earthly sphere and ascended into heaven. Jesus had promised his followers that when he left them, he would not leave them orphaned, but would send another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who was already *with* them, and would be *within* them. (John 14:16-18) In the Book of Ezekiel, God said, “I will gather you from the nations, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered... I will give them **one** heart, and put a *new* spirit within them; I will remove the heart of *stone* from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh...” (Ezekiel 11:17-19)

This is what is happening in today’s reading from Acts. Jews from all over the known world had gathered to celebrate God’s Law carved on stone tablets; but now, God was putting his law *within* them and writing it on their hearts. He was giving them – just as he gives us! – one heart, and was putting a **new** spirit within them, within us.

But what **is** this spirit? If this spirit is put within us, what does it feel like? What does it motivate us to do?

My nephew, the Rev. Dr. Carter Aikin, gave me some wonderful insights into these questions in a Pentecost sermon he preached in 2006. I have his permission to share with you, at some length, some of what he said that day. Carter said,

“I remember when I was a kid, the very first time I got to go a baseball game. The only thing I can remember from that day, and I’ll never forget it, is what it felt like when I first walked out of the stairway, into the open stadium.

“Wow. You go from that cramped, confusing echoey hallway, and then bang, the lights, that big immaculate green lawn, the smell of it, that huge space. I was terrified, and I was amazed. I’ll never forget that.

“There’s lots of things you could call that mixture of sights, sounds and smells, but I’m going to call it the spirit of baseball. When my team did well, I cheered; when a ball was hit way back, I held my breath to see whether it would go all the way over the fence for a home run. The spirit of baseball, to me as a kid, at least, was a really real thing. No one has to *tell* you to cheer and clap for the home team. The *spirit of the game* does that.

“[But] Baseball is not the only place where you can sort of see a *human* kind of spirit at work. In fact, to me, the place where this kind of thing is most obvious is in much nastier situations. Imagine if you can, a real incident that happened a few years ago. Toward the end of a professional ice hockey game between Boston and Vancouver, a player on the Boston team chased down one of the members of the Vancouver team and hit him in the back of the head with his hockey stick, knocking him out cold.

“After the game, this Boston player was really sorry and genuinely remorseful for what he had done. His explanation should interest us. He said: ‘I just got way too carried away.’ Carried away with what? The spirit of competition? the spirit of the game? the spirit of vengeance? This is a reasonable, thinking human being, who certainly wouldn’t walk up to you on the street on a Sunday afternoon, and knock you unconscious with a blunt object. The spirit of competitiveness, the spirit of aggressiveness, these are powerful things.

“Let’s go even deeper. I have seen... video tape of the trials that followed the torturing and killing of over 1 million people in South Africa under apartheid. One video clip that I’ll never forget, was in the courtroom of these trials, where a torture victim was allowed to tell the story of his torture right in front of one of the guys who had done it to him. The soldier that had tortured him sat on the witness stand and sobbed; not just cried, but sobbed inconsolably, as he was confronted with the truth of what he had done.

“This soldier was clearly deeply saddened by what he had done, and had lifelong scars of regret, sorrow, and remorse. But, I’ll bet he wasn’t crying when he *committed* those crimes. I think it is much more probable that he, and the other soldiers that helped him, were laughing and joking as they tortured this man.

“We can, I think, accurately say that he was caught up in the spirit of hatred, the spirit of racism, the spirit of bloodlust, the spirit of domination. These are powerful things. He did things on that day that he wouldn’t *dream* of doing on another day.

“We don’t *excuse* him for that reason, of course, any more than we excuse the hockey player. These men were and are still free thinking and acting human beings. It was still by their own hands that they did these things, even if they were caught up in the spirit of something else when they were doing it.

“We human beings, whether we like it or not, are extremely receptive to the stuff we get ‘caught up in.’ That’s why we cheat on tests. That’s why we say nasty things about other people [so that we can] appear better than **they** are to our friends. *Those* times are when we are at our worst.

“Pentecost, however, celebrates, rejoices, makes new, the time when humanity is at its best. We are invited to be carried away with, caught up in not some **human**

thing that makes us *less*, not the spirit of some human institution or habit, but caught up in the **Holy Spirit**.

“God invites us to be caught up in God’s self... and in this close intimacy of relationship we are made **greater** than [our ‘small self.’] (unquote)

My friends, Carter preached that sermon on Pentecost, 14 years ago; but I believe the Word of God still speaks strongly through his words today. For there are *many* spirits at large in our world today. The spirit of competition, certainly: not so much between sports teams (which are largely grounded), but competition between those identifying with different political parties and those holding political offices. There is the spirit of meanness, nastiness; the spirit of prejudice and racism. There is the spirit of superiority, over and against those whom we deem “less than” ourselves, whether the gauge be level of education, socio-economic class, country of origin, skin color, or what have you. Related to this is the spirit of power or domination, which I have to believe was at least *one* of the spirits that those police officers involved in the death of George Floyd were caught up in and carried away by. (Again, this is not to relieve them in any way, shape, or form of responsibility for what they did.)

A very obvious spirit at large in our land is the spirit of frustration: frustration at being locked down in our homes; frustration at not being able to open up our businesses or churches or schools – at least not the way they used to be; frustration that, *one more time*, a black man has been killed needlessly while handcuffed and in police custody. Among the black community, there is the spirit of fear and powerlessness, arising from the sense that **any** encounter with police might end very badly. A psychologist I heard interviewed recently said that this spirit of powerlessness gives rise to a desperate need to reclaim *some* personal power, which can be manifested in vandalism, looting, and rioting, which give people at least a *temporary* sense of having **some** kind of power.

There is the spirit of polarization – of wanting to make anything a partisan issue, including, incredibly, the results of scientific studies.

Of course, we know that, in recent months, there has also been a spirit of self-sacrifice – largely coming from those people on the front lines of the pandemic: medical workers, grocery store workers, meat-packing workers, and people in other “essential” occupations who have literally put their lives on the line for the good of us all. My friends, can we not build and expand on **that** spirit?

On March 4, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln stood up to give his First Inaugural Address. It had only been a month since 7 southern states declared that they had seceded from the United States of America to form the Confederate States of America. The Battle of Fort Sumter, the opening battle of the Civil War, was still a month away. Our nation was *fraught* with the spirit of polarization, the spirit of fear, the spirit of “us vs. them,” and perhaps even, in some corners, the

spirit of hatred. In the midst of this incredibly difficult climate, President Lincoln stood up and said to all the states over which he had been elected to govern: We are not enemies, but friends. We *must* not be enemies. Though passion may have *strained*, it must not *break* our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory... will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the **better** angels of our nature.”

The better angels of our nature.

On the Day of Pentecost, Jews from every nation of the known world – black Africans, brown Middle-Easterners, white Europeans, all speaking different languages, were gathered in Jerusalem for the festival celebrating God’s gift of the Law, inscribed on stone tablets. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where Jesus’ disciples were sitting. They were filled with the **Holy** Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. And all the people from every nation of the known world marveled that they could hear God’s Word spoken to them in their own language.

And my friends, it can – and does – still happen today. People of faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, speak and act in a language that every human on the face of this earth can understand: the language of God’s love. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus said to his followers: “I give you a new commandment, a new law: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

What spirit are you and I caught up in? It is such an important question to ask in our lives, in our world, today! Might we be caught up in – and carried away by – the spirit of divine, all-inclusive love? The Holy Spirit of God?

AMEN