

Pentecost Sunday, A. May 31, 2020.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh. Luke names the places from which these people come, places that, for most of us, have faded from memory. It would work better for us, I think, if we read “Now there were devout folks from every neighborhood in Jerusalem: Hinsdale, Austin, Englewood, the Loop, Chinatown, Oak Park, Berwyn and Little Village, River Forest and Cicero, Beverly and Lake Forest, Kenilworth and Bronzeville, natives and immigrants, black and white and brown. And all heard the proclamation of God’s deeds of power.” In case there is any ambiguity about what Luke, and the Holy Spirit for that matter, are up to, Peter describes it for us: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon ALL flesh,” sons and daughters, young and old, enslaved and free. Peter’s talking about everybody, and he really means everybody. Paul says it too in today’s reading from 1 Corinthians: “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.” You cannot talk about Pentecost without talking about the universality of God’s love, and the community that we, the church, are called to be.

Pentecost is a sign of hope, but it is also a sign of condemnation. Because we have never been the Pentecost community. We have collectively drawn a line in our souls that marks the limit of just how far we are willing to be transformed. In the United States, especially among white folks, that line has often been white supremacy. God has made all peoples, all races, of all languages, God’s children. God is building a family where everybody can eat and be nourished, can love and rest. And we have steadfastly refused to sit at table with our siblings. And now, lynchings are televised and our cities are burning.

The Pentecost story in Acts shows us who we are supposed to be, but John’s more subdued story of the gift of the Spirit does more to show us what we are supposed to do. Three days after being lynched on a Roman tree, Jesus appears resurrected among his friends and says “Peace be with you.” Because our world has become so loud, because it is now always narrated in ALL CAPS, our minds for comfort add “and quiet” to every mention of peace. Whether we’re yelling “serenity now” or carrying a sign that says, “no justice, no peace,” we think of peace as quiet, stillness, weighted blankets and chamomile tea.

But I’m afraid that this is not the peace that Jesus gives in the Holy Spirit. The peace of Christ is not stillness and quiet, but is the becoming-whole of the world. Jesus comes among his friends and says “peace be with you.” He shows them his wounds and says it again. Then he *sends them out*, gives them the Holy Spirit, and tells them to forgive sins and to retain them. None of this is an accident. He shows them his wounds, the wounds from his sanctioned murder, his lynching. Receiving the peace that Jesus gives with the Holy Spirit involves looking unflinchingly at wounds—our own wounds, the wounds we have inflicted, and those inflicted on our behalf. For white Americans today, it involves seeing the wounds of the black community, with compassion and not defensiveness, with the courage to consider how we benefit from them, whether we will them or not. We see the wounds even when they are not ours; we see the whole

person who is wounded; we do not look away even if we can. We look until we ourselves are wounded. We have begun to erase the border drawn in our souls when we would rather share those wounds than inflict them or benefit from them.

Receiving the peace Christ gives in the Spirit involves being sent out to build it. The peace of Christ cannot be hoarded—it must be shared. And in a world drunk on white supremacy and on fire with rage, for it to be shared it must be built. It is long, painstaking work that begins with individual relationships but cannot stop there. It must take on the structures that hold our lives up, while holding others down. It cannot be done just within the walls of the church, but must be done everywhere. And of course, we cannot do it alone—as soon as Jesus gives his friends their commission, he also breathes on them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that keeps the fire of courage burning in our hearts, that keeps the wind of hope blowing in the most unexpected places. The peace Christ gives blows us out into the world to continue the work of our Lord, building that family where all can eat and love.

In John, that work is described in a way that may at first surprise us: “if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Most of us do not think of ourselves as forgivers and retainers of sin. But forgiveness is the good news that we are to proclaim. It is not an erasure of the past, but a restoration of right relationship. It is, finally, a calling of all people to the banquet God sets for all peoples together. The life made possible by forgiveness is the hope a broken world desperately needs to hear. But Jesus does not tell us just to throw a blanket of forgiveness over everything. The retention of sins today means telling the truth about ongoing sin. Among many other things, it means telling the truth about white supremacy, that it is pervasive and wicked. That it reaches to the highest levels of our communities and is rooted deep in our way of life, from mass incarceration to the achievement gap at our high school. Retaining sin won’t mean for us refusing to forgive the penitent; it means telling the truth, even when it is unpopular and may cause pain.

With the images of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery seared into our minds, Pentecost is a sign of condemnation. But it is also a sign of hope. We should not be comfortable, but we have not been left comfortless. The Holy Spirit that blows us out to build the peace that is the world’s becoming-whole stays with us and sustains us. The long work to build a world of Christ’s peace is also the path to receiving that peace. Peace be with you. Now go out and make it. Amen.