

Sermon – “Lift Every Voice”
Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020
Scripture Readings: Acts 2:1-6, 12-18
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Our scripture reading is Acts 2:1-6, 12-18. This is Luke’s account of what took place at the Pentecost festival fifty days following the Passover, which marked the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those gathered hear the words of the disciples in their own dialect and experience God’s presence in a life changing way. Hear now the word of God.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (pause)

Members of the congregation speak vs. 17-18 in the languages of Spanish (Beth Allen), German (Bob Blythe), Korean (Sophia Choi), Mandarin (Haofang Chuang, and French (Peter Kieffer).

Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ ‘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.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. Amen*

The title of the sermon: “Lift Every Voice”

The text: All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Acts 2:4

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we gather to celebrate Pentecost and to seek inspiration in lifting our voices for the good of the world. As we reflect on the mystery and wonder of your presence in our lives, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

On this Pentecost Sunday we remember the extraordinary experience of those who gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, fifty days following Easter morning; and how God's spirit lived and moved among them, in a new way, like a mighty wind, empowering them with words in voices lifted and an understanding that transcended language and culture.

Those gathered knew as they watched the tongues of fire, even as Moses knew when he stood before the burning bush, that they were on Holy Ground, that God was in their midst creating something new...something unspeakable.

"How could this be?" some asked with amazement. The miracle of God's spirit coming on Pentecost is the miracle of people understanding one another, moving beyond their own particular dialect or point of view. The breath that breathed life into Christ's church was not the tongues of fire, per say, but the miracle of people listening to and respecting one another. These lifted voices would soon transform the community that was to become the "People of the Way." This community would bring people together from different cultures and races to share leadership and resources for the good of all. Biases and prejudices would be transformed in the spirit of Christ.

In the gift of the Holy Spirit, believers receive a strength, which nurtures and sustains us. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, believers receive courage, which empowers us to advocate for the poor, to liberate the captives, and to speak on behalf of those whose voices have been long silenced.

Pentecost could not come soon enough this year, as we in Illinois complete 70 days of the Governor's executive stay at home order to protect one another from a virus which effects people of all cultures, languages, religions, and races around the world. Each of us who has a voice to lift is vulnerable. Perhaps what makes this particular virus pandemic unprecedented is that we live in a time when internet and travel connects our lives and voices in an unparalleled way. In some fortuitous manner, the COVID-19 virus, which is not a punishment from God as some have alleged, has brought our world together like never before.

We are reminded of how much we have in common with those who speak different languages. We understand the depth of human sorrow and loss that transcends cultures and continents. Last week I was in this sanctuary when Diane Dietz, accompanied by Dale Rogers, lifted her voice to sing Requiem. The translation of the Latin is "Grant them eternal rest, Lord, and let perpetual light shine on them." Before Diane sang, she shared that she was singing not only for those who gave their lives for our country in honor of Memorial Day, but also for all those who have died from the Coronavirus. When we see coffins lined up whether in Italy or Brazil or China, we cannot help but feel the pain of our fellow human beings.

Another truth COVID-19 has taught us is that the suffering from this pandemic is not equitable. Because we know so many in our neighborhood are struggling to make ends meet, we have been stocking our "little pantry" located at Graham Elementary School daily. The Kenya Mission Team gathered for a Zoom meeting last Saturday and learned how shortfalls in food distribution has led to yet another crisis in their country.

In our country, relatively more African Americans dying from the virus troubles us. Sociologists explain that this follows from years of systemic racism which has led to greater poverty and inferior health care. It is also an indication that more people of color are working lower paying essential jobs and are at greater risk.

When we compound this painful reality with the video that shook our world this week as an African American man lifts his voice to ask for mercy while in the custody of four police officers, we are not surprised to hear the cry for justice by so many.

The destructive behavior of a few does not negate the many peaceful and sincere voices lifted for justice any more than the destructive behavior of these four negates the good work provided by so many dedicated police officers.

On this Pentecost Sunday as we commemorate the gift of God's liberating, inclusive spirit and the miracle of people understanding one another, moving beyond their own particular dialect or point of view, let us be diligent in listening to and respecting one another.

Let us move beyond being petty, narrow-minded people and open our hearts to God's spirit and the wideness of God's mercy, which empower us to advocate for the poor, to liberate the captives, and to speak on behalf of those whose voices have been long silenced.

Let us pass the sacred torch of the spirit to our children in a procession through generations of family and humanity. At the very heart of our spirituality is the understanding that our shared humanity is a gift and that the God who gives us the spirit joined us in that humanity, teaching us "what you do unto the least of these, you do unto me." With every ordinary act of kindness and every lifted voice for justice, we stand on sacred ground.

May we be people who are empowered by God's spirit, which surrounds us like the mummer of the dove's song and the rush of the wind. May we advocate for others and move beyond the barriers of race, language, and culture. May we never lose our awe of the Holy Trinity, whose name is too holy to speak, who lived among us and died for us, and whose spirit lifts every voice. Amen.