

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Patrick C. Ward

Pentecost Sunday Year A RCL • June 1, 2020

Psalm 104, Acts 2:1-21 and John 20:19-23

No Ordinary Time: This American Pentecost

Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit. Shed abroad this gift throughout the world.

In the name of God. Amen.

Suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them. And a tongue rested on each of them. They began to speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability.ⁱ

We sometimes call this day, the Feast of Pentecost, “The Birthday of the Church.” That term this year though is landing a little innocuously. To me, it sounds like terrifying chaos! All were amazed and perplexed, Acts tells us, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Today’s story begins calmly enough. The disciples are in Jerusalem, sitting in a house. The account in Acts is unclear as to how many are present. But the movement has grown since the morning of the Resurrection to about 120 people. It’s apparently that same upper room in the house which, according to tradition, belonged to Mark. It has been their retreat. Their safe space.

And then something mystical and marvelous happens. A sound like the rush of a violent wind. Divided tongues of fire descend. And then suddenly it is as if the walls of the house itself are blown out. What had been internal and private and sheltered – safe space – is suddenly open and wheeling and chaotic. We’re not told in Acts that the very first Jesus people have gone outside, come out of the upper room, but suddenly that is where we seem to be. Outside. In a teeming crowd. Everyone, everyone from everywhere, is there. And this is where Peter gives his Pentecost sermon.

“God declares,” says Peter, “that the Spirit will be poured out among all flesh.”ⁱⁱ

Now, we could call this the birthday of the church! But does the imagery of cake and candles really do justice to what has happened here? It’s as if something has broken open and rained down upon everyone. Everyone! It’s Pente-chaos! It’s as if the walls have dissolved! Not merely the walls of the upper room but the dividing walls of language. *“And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”ⁱⁱⁱ*

This is what the crowd wants to know. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. They’re all there. And suddenly it’s as if the tribal differences, all of the markers, have been dissolved too. Everyone suddenly understands everyone else! Church is not merely a place. It’s a very specific way of being together.

“I don’t want to just *go* to church,” said a parishioner to me this week, reflecting on our currently off-limits building. “I don’t want to just *go* to church. I am more interested in *being* the church.”

I am wondering if we can remember that together – not simply *going to* but *being* – on and after that eventual day when we do return. In some ways Pentecost is all about getting out of the house, if the houses we have been living in have kept us too much to ourselves, have facilitated our dividing the world in *us* and *them*.

For the time being though, so much, this Pentecost, is keeping us in. There is the obvious, of course. Ten weeks into COVID-19, we do not yet know the shape of our life to come. Millions of Americans are newly unemployed. And most searingly this week, millions of Americans have witnessed the death in Minneapolis of an uncharged and hand-cuffed black man. George Floyd, his throat beneath the knee of a white police officer.

“You hide your face and they are terrified,” says the psalmist this morning. “You take away their breath and they die and return to the dust.”^{iv}

We can’t hear “I can’t breathe” – the last words of George Floyd – without recalling that these were last words of Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2017 under similar circumstances.

And breath moves throughout our readings for this week. In John’s gospel, this after-Easter Jesus, his wounds still visible, breathes on the sequestered twelve.^v That’s how he gives them the Spirit, through his very breath. It’s seen specifically as liberation and power in John’s gospel. Jesus breathes on them.

Who can breathe just now in America? And who – literally or figuratively – cannot?

“What kind of a country do we want?” asks the writer Marilynne Robinson in an essay this week in *The New York Review of Books*.^{vi} While any one of us can fall ill to COVID-19, Robinson observes that poverty, crowding and exhaustion have a lot to do with who lives and who succumbs.

And in the sometimes too-quiet of my home this week I have been thinking about the virus and I have been thinking about my own racism. We live embedded just now in their double helix chain. These are systems, not necessarily of our own construction, that nonetheless enmesh all of us.

And with both COVID-19 and systemic racism, if I privately congratulate myself, tell myself I am somehow **not** a potential spreader, I am in fact a threat. How did Rabbi Heschel put it once? “Few are guilty, but all are responsible.”^{vii}

Few are guilty, but all are responsible. So I try to do the responsible thing. For COVID-19 that means wearing a mask. It’s loving myself and loving that stranger six feet away, who’s nervously eyeing the avocados in the produce section at the Mount Auburn Star Market.

Things aren’t as simple when it comes to racism, but perhaps our lessons this morning have something to teach us.

“God is not interested in premature healing,” writes the Episcopal priest Broderick Greer in his essay “On Racial Reconciliation and Justice.”^{viii}

“God is not interested in premature healing.” Greer is reflecting specifically on the story we have heard this morning from John. Jesus shows the gathered disciples his hands and hid feet and his side. Perhaps the Jew the disciples fear most in that locked room is in fact this pierced Jesus.^{ix}

His lynched body a sign of their guilt, of course. But his strange exhaling a sign of new life to come. Someday, and not perhaps without more difficulty and trauma. “*Naming* traumas, scars and other dimensions of our experience,” continues Geer, “must be present in our commitment to offsetting anti-black racism in our time and in generations to come.” If we follow this Jesus, he concludes, not admire but actually *follow* this Jesus, “we can recognize the tragedies of our present age, understand them for what they are, and journey to a place and time when every tribe, nation and language celebrates God’s wondrous deeds in their native tongue and in their native land.”^x

As I think about COVID-19, as I think about racism, as I think about this double helix, I’m thinking specifically about our bodies, how these are *embodied* things. They are about our very eyes and mouths and ears. Too speak, to remain silent. To listen. Perhaps the beginning of ending racism is opening ourselves to those who are different from us, is handing the microphone in fact to someone who may disagree with us. To wear the mask, to speak or to refrain from speaking. To listen. Perhaps this is how we who are white people begin.

You know, there is an old custom in the church of referring to these coming months, between Pentecost and Advent, as “Ordinary Time.” Ordinary Time. No major feasts. Our gospel lessons will focus not on the big events – the birth or transfiguration or death or resurrection – but on the works, on the healing, on the active ministry of Jesus.

Ordinary time. I’ve been hearing the aristocratic trill of Eleanor Roosevelt this week. “This is no ordinary time,” she remarked in a famous speech in 1940.^{xi} The Great Depression not yet over, global fascism and world war were looming. “We cannot tell from day to day what may come. This is no ordinary time.”

The first Pentecost was no ordinary time. These weeks we are living have *been*, the balance of this year 2020 will *be* no ordinary time. And in them, through the love of God, the compassionate works of Jesus, and the searching, creative power of the Holy Spirit, may we and our nation and our world be made new.

Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world. In the name of God.

Amen.

ⁱ Acts 2:2-3

ⁱⁱ Acts 2:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 2:8

^{iv} Psalm 104:29

^v John 20:22

^{vi} Robinson, Marilynne, “What Kind of a Country Do We Want?” *The New York Review of Books*, Volume LXVII, Number 10, June 11, 2020, p. 43. Also available at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/06/11/what-kind-of-country-do-we-want/>

^{vii} Heschel, A.J., *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), p. 19

^{viii} Greer, Broderick, "On Racial Reconciliation and Justice," included in *Following the Way of Jesus*, Michael B. Curry, editor (New York: Church Publishing, 2017) p. 63

^{ix} Thanks to my colleague Morgan Allen, who suggested this fresh read on those troubling words "locked for fear of the Jews" in John 20:19

^x Greer, *Ibid.*

^{xi} Roosevelt was addressing the National Democratic Convention in July, 1940 in Chicago. She had traveled there at the request of Franklin Roosevelt and U.S. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to unify a party torn over the nomination of Henry Wallace to the vice-presidency. You can learn more about her speech at <https://fdrlibrary.wordpress.com/tag/no-ordinary-time/>