

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday
May 31, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 17:1-11

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

We've been separated from face-to-face worship now for two-and-a-half months, since the middle of March. It's hard sometimes. Coming together to be part of a larger gathering seems so near the heart of our identity.

Some days have been especially hard. I think of Holy Week and Easter, in particular:

- handing out palm branches to wave festively in procession on Palm Sunday, and sharing the reading parts for the Passion Gospel thereafter;
- enjoying a meal of dried fruit and bread together in Brooks Hall on Maundy Thursday, then moving into the sanctuary to kneeling and wash one another's feet;
- walking the labyrinth or the traditional Stations of the Cross on Good Friday;
- revelling in the resurrection on Easter Eve, stomping our feet at death and joining in the Easter refrain: "Christ is risen!"; and, of course
- filling the pews on Easter Sunday, singing songs of celebration.

We observed all these holy days, but it's not been the same.

So, too, for Pentecost. It's another one of those especially hard occasions to celebrate remotely, because it's supposed be a party for us ... and we do it up right here (normally, that is):

- I encourage you to wear red ... and you do! (Many of you.)
- I challenge you to read a few verses in a language other than English ... and you try!
(Some of you ...
French, German, Spanish, Gibberish, Italian, Swedish, Latvian. To name a few.)
- And I invite you to stay after worship on Pentecost Sunday and enjoy Pentecost *sundaes*: vanilla ice cream covered with strawberry sauce and whipped cream and red sprinkles!

But not this year. Not this Pentecost. The only ice cream today is what you find in your freezer. Make no mistake, that's a disappointment; I'd rather we could have a party together. But take care not to make the mistake of confusing disappointment with devastation.

I worry a bit that preoccupation with all that we cannot do might distract us from all that we still can do, from all that we are called still to do.

If we were meeting together this morning, we might celebrate baptisms. Peter Knobel was scheduled to be baptized in April, so we might have rescheduled him to today. Chaney and Kathryn Swiney welcomed their firstborn into the world last month on “Earth Day,” so maybe they would have presented baby Elias for baptism today.

We cannot celebrate those baptisms here today, surrounding these children with family and friends and a wider community of faith.

But we celebrate our baptismal identity all the same.

As we heard in our reading 1 Corinthians this morning:

Porque por un solo Espíritu fuimos todos bautizados para formar un solo cuerpo ...

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.

Our lives are bound together.

Early in 17th century London, John Donne was Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral. He lived through several waves of plague that ravaged the city, and he was often ill during these perilous times. On one occasion when he was unwell (and thought he was dying), he heard bells ringing, signifying that someone had died. For a moment, he thought the bells were ringing for him.

And that’s the backstory to the most famous lines he ever wrote:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.

And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

His words remind us we do not live in isolation.ⁱ On Pentecost, we affirm that we are all connected – to one another and to every child of God: Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, as Paul said; Black or brown or white, rich or poor, as we should still say.

And so this weekend, as our nation surpasses 100,000 confirmed deaths from COVID-19, we join other people of faith and pause to grieve and honor all who have died these past few months.

Because every death diminishes us, we mourn those who have died, too many to name.

And I also call on us to name some hard truths about this virus and our world.

At every baptism – and on every occasion when we renew our baptismal vows – we all make promises:

- to proclaim good news in what we say and what we do;
- to love our neighbors as ourselves;
- to strive for justice and peace among all people;
- to respect the dignity of every human being.

In that spirit, let us take note that this virus is disproportionately hard on persons of color:

- by at least one analysis, African Americans are dying at 2.6 times the rate of others;
- the Navajo Nation has the highest per capita infection rate in the country;
- our Latino neighbors in central Oregon are at particular risk, both in terms of their health and their livelihoods.

And let us pay attention to another kind of sickness in our nation. Even as we name the virus that kills, let us also name the racism that kills.

I'm thinking, of course, of George Floyd – complaining, after he had been handcuffed and subdued by four white police officers, that he could not breathe ... and yet one of those whose charge had been “to protect and serve” kept his knee on the man’s neck.

In a word to the Church, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, decried the killing this way:

In the midst of COVID-19 and the pressure cooker of a society in turmoil, a Minnesota man named George Floyd was brutally killed. His basic human dignity was stripped by someone charged to protect our common humanity.

And he went on to note that this death is far from an isolated event.

Perhaps the deeper pain is the fact that this was not an isolated incident. It happened to Breonna Taylor on March 13 in Kentucky. It happened to Ahmaud Arbery on February 23 in Georgia. Racial terror in this form occurred when I was a teenager growing up black in Buffalo, New York. It extends back to the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 and well before that. It’s not just our present or our history. It is part of the fabric of American life.

They, along with other black men and women (too many to name) deserve at least our outrage.

And before we get sidetracked by the rioting that has followed the death of George Floyd, recall what John F. Kennedy observed nearly 60 years ago: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”

For all the progress we have made as a nation, our world has not changed as much it should have, not nearly as much as we'd like to believe. We have, it seems, made "peaceful revolution impossible." Violence is the inevitable consequence.

If we were meeting together here today, I would have asked you to read a few verses from our first reading from Acts in some language other than English. I'm glad Kake could read one of the readings in French and that Brent could read the other in Spanish.

Still, it's not the same as the chaotic cacophony we would usually hear.

That may actually be a good thing. As I typically imagine the scene described in Acts, it's absolutely magical and mystical and spontaneous. But even if it all really happened the way it's described, that's not how it's worked ever since. It's hard to learn a new language. It's hard, in my experience, to make myself understood by someone who doesn't speak English.

When we promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, I think of this as an act of translation. Will we do the hard work, so that our words and our deeds may translate the "Good News" of God's love to others in ways they can hear and understand?

Again, as Michael Curry says in words to encourage and empower us:

... we need not be paralyzed by our past or our present. We are not slaves to fate but people of faith. Our long-term commitment to racial justice and reconciliation is embedded in our identity as baptized followers of Jesus. We will still be doing it when the news cameras are long gone ...

It must go on when racist violence and police brutality are no longer front-page news. It must go on when the work is not fashionable, and the way seems hard, and we feel utterly alone. It is the difficult labor of picking up the cross of Jesus like Simon of Cyrene, and carrying it until no one – no matter their color, no matter their class, no matter their caste – until no child of God is degraded and disrespected by anybody. That is God's dream, this is our work, and we shall not cease until God's dream is realized ...

Real love is the dogged commitment to live my life in the most unselfish, even sacrificial ways; to love God, love my neighbor, love the earth and truly love myself. Perhaps most difficult in times like this, it is even love for my enemy. That is why we cannot condone violence. Violence against any person – conducted by some police officers or by some protesters – is violence against a child of God created in God's image. No, as followers of Christ, we do not condone violence.

Neither do we condone our nation's collective, complicit silence in the face of injustice and violent death. The anger of so many on our streets is born out of the accumulated frustration that so few seem to care when another black, brown or native life is snuffed out.

But there is another way ...

Love, as Jesus teaches, is action like this as well as attitude. It seeks the good, the well-being, and the welfare of others as well as one's self. That way of real love is the only way there is.ⁱⁱ

This is what Pentecost – and the promises we make – is all about.

I enjoy the party, the wearing of red, the cacophony of languages, the ice cream sundaes. And I would enjoy being gathered together to share all of that.

But maybe it's good that we cannot do all this this year. Maybe our little parties are themselves distractions from our high calling.

And maybe this year's Pentecost can be a reminder that the point was never about enjoying a party here inside a church building that pertains not at all to the world outside nor our calling to be the church out there. Pentecost was always about being sent out to take on the hard work of translating the good news of the Gospel into articulate words and meaningful actions that speak of God's love for all God's children.

Starting this morning, and continuing through the first Sunday in September the Presiding Bishops of both the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are encouraging us to regularly pray "A Prayer for the Power of the Spirit among the People of God." It seems a good way for me to end this morning:

God of all power and love, we give thanks for your unfailing presence
and the hope you provide in times of uncertainty and loss.
Send your Holy Spirit to enkindle in us your holy fire.
Revive us to live as Christ's body in the world:
a people who pray, worship, learn, break bread, share life, heal neighbors,
bear good news, seek justice, rest and grow in the Spirit.
Wherever and however we gather,
unite us in common prayer and send us in common mission,
that we and the whole creation might be restored and renewed,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ David Maclure @ <http://stjohnsisleworth.org.uk/2020/04/05/no-man-is-an-island/>.

ⁱⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://mailchi.mp/episcopalchurch/presiding-bishop-currys-word-to-the-church-when-the-cameras-are-gone-we-will-still-be-here?e=db21b1a8a0>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Text of prayer @ <https://blogs.elca.org/eirr/ecumenical-call-to-common-prayer/>.